Slope

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Rating:
Mature

Archive Warning:
Graphic Depictions Of Violence

Category:
Gen

Fandom:
僕のヒーローアカデミア | Boku no Hero Academia | My Hero Academia

Relationships:
Bakugou Katsuki & Midoriya Izuku, Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead & Bakugou Katsuki &; Midoriya Izuku, Bakugou Katsuki & Original Character(s), Bakugou Katsuki & Everyone, Bakugou Katsuki & Eri, Bakugou Katsuki & Kirishima Eijirou

Characters:
Bakugou Katsuki, Midoriya Izuku, Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead, Yagi Toshinori | All Might, Kirishima Eijirou, Todoroki Shouto, Original Characters, Class 1-A (My Hero Academia), U.A. Faculty (My Hero Academia), League of Villains (My Hero Academia), Shie Hassaikai | Eight Precepts of Death, Eri (My Hero Academia), Other Character Tags to Be Added

Additional Tags:
Shameless wish fullfillment, Crack Treated Seriously, Bakugou Katsuki Swears A Lot, Bakugou Katsuki is Bad at Feelings, Bakugou Katsuki Redemption, Bakugou Katsuki Whump, Bakugou Katsuki Needs a Hug, a really really really big one, He's not having a good time, but it'll get better along the way, BAMF Bakugou Katsuki, reluctant vigilante bakugou katsuki, he doesn't ask to adopt a cat or a tiny overpowered six year old either but he does eventually, Midoriya Izuku is a Good Friend, Midoriya Izuku is a Little Shit, in a good way, Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead Needs a Vacation, and about 374526 liters of coffee, Torture, Kidnapping, Suicidal Thoughts, Near Death Experiences, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, additional/specific tags before every chapter, worldbuilding and slight magical elements, sorta ghibli inspo but make it angsty,

Quirkless Bakugou Katsuki, weird quirk shennanigans, i take canon and shit on it a lil ngl, Not Beta Read, Author Is Sleep Deprived, Hurt/Comfort, Bakugou Mitsuki's Bad Parenting, Masaru's too, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Suicide Attempt, Harassment, social media and media harassment, Bakugou Katsuki & Midoriya Izuku Friendship, Unreliable Narrator

Language:
English

Series:
Part 1 of Slope Universe

Collections:
BKG Fic-List, Books Read - Not Completed (MHA), Bnha Bookclub Discord Recs, I Sorted Through Shit And Found Gold, BNHA Fics I Adore, Bakugo to Bakubro, the pickiest and pettiest, Creative Chaos Discord Recs, Best of My Hero Academia, The Best Fics I Have Had The Pleasure of Reading, Late Night Reads For Restless Spirits, Best stories for sleepless nights, my hero academia fics!!, International Fanworks Day 2022 - Classic Fic Recs, SakurAlpha's Fic Rec of Pure how did you create this you amazing bean, Best Bakugou-centric with plot focus (that|deserve|attention), Angsty Katsuki is the best type of story ＜3, 📚 Fanfic Forum Discord Recs, Amaris' Favorite Ever BNHA Fictions That She Has Read More Than You Can Count, To the pain, Into the rabbit hole, not completed bkg fics, Yadonushi’s Favorite BNHA Tenants, Long Fics to Binge, Scrumptious Fics For When Hungry, Screw Horikoshi these fics are cannon ✧, My Entire History, Годнота_Макси, miQ_y's fav fav fics

Stats:
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Chapters: 37/40

Slope

by sen_timentai

Summary

“I’m not a hero. Or a good person,” Katsuki says, giving Aizawa a pointed look, “So leave me alone. I don’t care about the League or UA, or you—” The two years he’s been away have been fine, more than fine, fucking fantastic actually if you ignore the bi-monthly near-death experiences. He doesn’t need this place. He doesn’t miss this place.

And yet, longing, a childish desire to tear up, or maybe blow something to bits, they all twist in his chest like a band of traitors regardless. “—I just want to go home.”

Or: the one where Katsuki and Izuku fail the first term exam, Aizawa discovers their pasts, and Katsuki is booted from UA. Featuring questionable descriptions of villain organizations, a slightly illegal moving shop, and your favorite emotionally constipated badass in distress with a newly discovered penchant for collecting strays.

We have fanart o(□□□)o spoilers for ch17 and another one

Notes

A little preface, this is a dumb idea of mine that has transformed into this wish-fulfillment beast. Don't keep your expectations too high, my writing is not the best, and most of this is borderline crack anyway, but I've got a good 50k of this pre-written, that I went back to edit about 39442 times, and I figured I might as well post it.

If you're a Katsuki hater looking for a fic where he gets comeuppance and everyone throws stones at him, you might want to look elsewhere. I love Katsuki and I love making him suffer, so he's the MC of this in a good way. Keep in mind though, that this chapter and many others are from his perspective, and he's a very unreliable narrator, and often thinks like an idiot, especially when it comes to Izuku.

There won't be any romantic relationships, I'm bending the canon characterizations a little, and there are a few OCs for plot

purposes. I'm hoping to update weekly or biweekly since I have the entire first chunk made up of seven hefty chapters of this written in advance. The pacing is relatively fast as well... I think. Also poor attempts at humor, you have been warned. I will include triggers in every beginning note for each chapter because there are too many.

TW // Dissasociation, mentions of bullying and suicide baiting, self-deprecation, and general negative thoughts, bad eating habits, digital harassment (sexual in one off hand line), mentioned attempted sexual harassment.

Chapter 1: A series of unfortunate events

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Katsuki's room is cold. Even though it's summer the cold seeps into his skin. He's still wearing his school uniform, worn out from being dragged around. The space around him seems to float, its familiar poster-clad walls closing in and disappearing into darkness. The light is off. The sun melts away through the window.

It's light, it's dark, it's something in between. It's light again. He doesn't move. The All Might plush on his desk stares with judging felt eyes. The sole picture of him and his mom and his dad where he's smiling, the one they took when he was four and insist Katsuki displays sits on his bookshelf or the nightstand. He's not sure. He can't hear well through the static. Or see. Or feel. He sits on his bed, against the decorative brick wall. It's supposed to be cool to the touch, but he can't feel it. Nor can he feel the scratchy, over-washed fitted sheet covering the mattress.

He's not sure how long it's been. A breath in and the sensation of air in his lungs makes him cough. His throat is dry. He needs water. He tells his body to get up and get the damn water, but as soon as the words leave his brain he watches them get eaten up by the void.

It takes at least twenty minutes for Katsuki to get his finger to twitch, and twenty more to win against the million needles pricking his body and stand up.

"We've got the scoop you've all been itching for, dear listeners," says the female anchor. The fluorescent shine of the studio lights makes the pallor of her skin and blue of her half-suit pop. She leans forward into the mic, eyes glowing. "Welcome to the afternoon segment of Ata-hi news. Today we're here to talk about none other than the recent drama at UA. To be more specific, the one surrounding one Bakugou Katsuki. The kid can't seem to keep his name out of the headlines."

"This might be the last we hear of him though, Houyori-san," chimes in the male anchor, a chalky guy with slicked black hair and a matching outfit in a darker blue.

"Right you are Osenu-san. And that's because dear listeners, as I'm

sure you've heard by now, he's gotten himself expelled from UA." Osenu gasps for dramatic effect as Houyori shuffles some papers in front of her, "For the lesser informed, Bakugou-kun was the victim of the Sludge Villain incident early April of last year, the one that caused several million yen in damages and had to be resolved by All Might himself. Also the winner of this year's UA Sports Festival for year one students. He is, or rather was, a member of the infamous Class 1-A, the one whose students are always finding themselves in trouble."

"No villains to be blamed for this plight." Osenu chuckles cynically. "He's a handful, to say the least."

"Mm." Houyori gives a slight nod. "He entered the scene with a bang at the Sports Festival. With one of the highest scores on a UA entrance exam in recent history, he's got quite the quirk and quite the battle skill. He promised rather cockily that he'd win in his pitiful rendition of a student pledge, but got so angry when he did that he needed to be chained to the podium with quirk restraints to participate in the award ceremony."

"—And I'm sure we all remember holding our breaths watching his ruthless fight with Uraraka Ochako in the first round— "

"Needless to say, not the best first impression. Many among the rising hero news circles theorized he'd be the type to fizzle out, or perhaps mellow with age and proper schooling." Houyori's face shifts from neutral to exasperated, eyebrows pinching. "Unfortunately, seems the Sports Festival was only a glimpse into a deeper-rooted problem, and it's safe to say Bakugou-kun's chances in the hero industry are as good as gone."

"A student getting expelled from UA is not an uncommon occurrence; many can't handle the stress and workload and get into trouble or drop out. 1-A's homeroom teacher Eraserhead is, in particular, known for expelling students he deems unfit." Osenu adjusts his headset. "But looking at Bakugou-kun's statistics, he seems to be excelling. This case is jarring because Bakugou Katsuki was expelled for being a bully, and a pretty severe one at that."

"How do we know that you may ask? It's because an insider from UA was kind enough to confirm this for us!"

"According to this insider, who has elected to stay anonymous, one of Bakugou's current classmates also went to middle school with him and had been a long time victim of his. The student had been keeping his

mouth shut for years since no one had ever stepped in before, but it seems something went awry and he finally spilled the beans to a teacher."

"UA is notorious for its harsh stance against serious bullies. The faculty realized the student didn't feel any remorse and intervened. Reportedly he got expelled and didn't take to the news kindly, considering he was dragged out of the building kicking and screaming- Audio only listeners might want to lower their device sound for this—"

The image of the two anchors in their studio shrinks to the corner as another window enlarges and fills the screen. It begins rolling, a little grainy and shaky, but clear enough to see that it's Katsuki, cursing censored with loud bleeps as he's dragged across the halls of UA by two security bots, leaving a path of explosions in his wake. When the camera returns to the studio, the female anchor winces at the clip.

"This, along with several others from different perspectives, was posted on Twitter on Monday and went nothing short of viral, amassing more than five million views overnight. It made people immediately curious."

"But wait—" Osenu's voice goes lower as if he's trying to imitate someone else. "—you might say— that just shows Bakugou-kun getting dragged around because he didn't like getting expelled! It doesn't explain why! Who's to say the bullying rhetoric isn't made up? And I'd reply that we all hoped it was that way at first, but soon accounts of people who knew the guy in elementary and middle school surfaced, and they only served to confirm that he was indeed a bully growing up."

"To seal the deal, a short voice clip —one we aren't playing because the contents can be triggering— featuring Bakugou suicide baiting a quirkless junior high classmate was leaked to our colleagues at Rokumo two days ago."

Osenu sucks in a breath. "It's a shame, he had potential."

"Meh," says Houyori, "plenty of talented kids out there. I wouldn't want someone like that playing hero in the first place." Her gaze turns bitter. "And you know, to act like that, you'd think he'd have grown up in unfortunate circumstances. But nope, he's in fact the only son of the Bakugou's, yes, the fashion famous ones, has a perfect combination quirk for hero work and was fawned over extensively as

a child. This is your typical case of a privileged kid wanting to feel strong by pushing others around. I say good riddance."

"Isn't it all a bit harsh? He's young and driven."

Houyori scoffs. "Driven to be a villain maybe. I'm glad UA opted to knock him down a peg and dish the consequences. I hope other schools follow suit. No one likes to talk about it, but we've got serious bullying and quirkism problems these days, and it all starts with the schools."

"Can't disagree there." Osenu shakes his head at the somber mood that's fallen on the studio. "Speaking of that problem, we've invited pro-hero and anti-discrimination advocate Rebound to discuss the topic at length, so make sure to stick around, because we'll be right back after the break-"

Katsuki presses the off button so hard the remote starts smoking. Stupid media extras and their unwanted opinions. He doesn't know why he watched that crap as long as he did in the first place.

He falls backward into the living room couch, messy pillows and balled-up covers digging into his back. The plastic wrapper of the sandwich he forced himself to eat sits discarded on the hag's expensive carpet.

So it's been three days since he got expelled. Apparently. He's still wearing his uniform. The mechanical tick of the wall clock grates on his ears.

Fuck.

Katsuki isn't sure where everything went wrong. He'd been killing it at UA, thank you very much. Sure there were moments of insecurity at the very beginning when he'd first realized UA's standards were indeed no joke and he'd have competition for the first time in his life. Sure he's still pissed at Half n' Half for backing off last second during the Sports Festival final and making Katsuki look like a fool. But he got over it. He moved on and destroyed the written midterms- probably beat out even Ponytail in Chemistry and Physics.

All that was left was the practical, and the universe must have it out for him, because he was paired with Deku, of all people, and against All Might. The hardest match-up possible. Worst of all he had to- he had to do fucking teamwork with Deku to win. Or at least that's what

Deku insisted they needed to do. It should go without saying that Katsuki wanted to ignore him, but the nerd went as far as to punch him to make a point.

Of course, Deku's plan was stupid in the end and All Might thwarted it in an instant. Then followed a mess of punches to the gut and beat down after beat down. He pushed until the end, even used an explosion too strong, and suffered the knockback so Deku could win for them. But Katsuki passed out and apparently Deku was dumb enough to try and come back to save him. Somewhere along the way, the timer ran out and they failed.

When they woke up in the infirmary and had to suffer through a lecture from Aizawa, Katsuki was ready to tear Deku a new one. What he didn't expect was Deku objecting to the results and with that stupid voice and stupid determined face; declare he shouldn't be forced to work together with the person who bullied him for a decade and have it affect his grade.

In typical Deku fashion, he seemed to both be unable to stop airing out load after load of their dirty laundry and horrified by everything coming out of his mouth like he was worried for Katsuki. Katsuki couldn't even deny anything, because he isn't a damn liar. Aizawa wasn't like those spineless teachers at Aldera or the elementary school whose name Katsuki doesn't even recall. He fixed Katsuki with a look so grave just remembering it makes his skin break out into shivers, and called Nezu to discuss things more at length.

UA had tapes of pretty much every interaction he and Deku had had inside the school grounds because of course, they did the damn stalkers. At the flip of a coin, Katsuki's behavior the teachers had already seen happen transformed into 'bullying' and 'abuse'. Exploding Deku's face during quirk training became 'possible harassment'. Telling Deku to shut the fuck up with the muttering so Katsuki could hear what the ever too quiet Cementos was saying was deemed 'unnecessary intimidation'.

And maybe things could've gone different if Katsuki hadn't told Aizawa some dumb shit in his fit of anger. Because sure, as much as he hated Deku, Katsuki knew that what he'd been doing to Deku before UA was wrong, in fact, he'd known that since after the Sludge Villain incident, which is why he'd stopped. But Katsuki was bubbling with barely contained rage. Because Deku -who had the audacity to pull a quirk out of thin air yet be absolute trash at using it, who'd been the reason they hadn't passed in the first place- decided to be a

manipulative shit and have this conversation at the most damning time possible.

So Katsuki got expelled.

He rolls on the couch and muffles a groan against the back cushion. If that wasn't enough, the media found out, so now he's getting chastised by everyone and their mothers and extras he doesn't even recognize are claiming they used to know him for their two minutes of fame. It's a miracle Deku's name has yet to be leaked, but as has been proven time and time again, fate likes him a whole lot more than it does Katsuki.

His head, his arms, and his entire body hurt even though he's done nothing these three days but sit still. The squishy couch seems to swallow him whole, and his bones fall like lead against it. The house is quiet. He closes his eyes.

When he wakes up, the date on his phone informs him he's slept for two days straight. He frowns and his back aches, his awkward positioning on the couch probably the culprit. His uniform sticks to him, and he realizes it's not a good idea, to sit in unchanged and by now explosive sweat-soaked clothes for almost a week. He forces himself upstairs and into the shower.

The water is so cold it makes dark spots swirl in his vision. He doesn't have enough of a mind to turn it to the hot side, taking instead a rushed, freezing shower and throwing on whatever clean clothes he can find. His hair drips water all over the hardwood floors and he can't bring himself to care.

Nothing in the house moves but him, not even the fake plants by the kitchen windowsill. It's exactly as the hag and the old man leave it every time they leave—

"—should've never been born at all!"

Because he's petty, he knocks over one of the stupid vases in the hallway and it falls to the floor and shatters with an unceremonious crack. Stupid vase. It's not as satisfying as he expected.

Memories follow every step in this place, furniture placed to cover scorch marks from when he was a brat and couldn't yet control his quirk, scuffs, and nicks on the pristine molding he'd try to hide in time for his parents' returns from their work trips, lest he gets an earful

from the hag and those dumb, disappointed looks from the old man. His training equipment in his room upstairs, the attic converted into a dump for destroyed bits and pieces.

If the house looks like there's no way a kid with explosive hands ever grew up in it, it's because Katsuki makes sure it does. It's not the first time his parents have left him to tend for himself and it won't be the last -that is if they don't kick him out when they get back- and he's not about to let them get on his case about his household management skills when often his parents are so busy holed up in their studio upstairs that films of dust would start building over the kitchen counters were he not here to take care of them.

The Bakugous are a family that believes in hard work and perfection, nothing less than the best. Katsuki hasn't done a good job of keeping up that reputation.

Framed award certificates line the walls, top university graduation diplomas, fashion innovation awards, medals of merit, Katsuki's own first places in regional competitions. He feels a sudden urge to smash them all to bits, especially the ones marked with his stupid name. The lonely, soulless house is stifling and the wall of awards seems less like a display to be proud of and more like a reminder of how much he's lost.

He's never liked the house more than your average guy likes their house, but today, he can't stand the sight of it. He dries his hair with a towel and pockets his phone and keys, heading outside to god knows where.

The following week is spent wandering the streets like a stray cat, leaving home at the crack of dawn and returning as late as possible (just to fool himself into trying to sleep for a few hours, it doesn't work) then rinse and repeat. Katsuki has never been a big fan of people or crowded spaces, but the uncountable gazes on his back feel extra heavy, and it's the Sports Festival aftermath all over again. He wears dark clothes unsuitable for the summer, covers his hair and face, yet he still gets recognized. It's nerve-fraying.

The worst are by far the mothers who see him crossing the street and turn to another crosswalk ten meters away as if they've stumbled upon a walking plague bearer. On one memorable occasion, a kid with big blue eyes wearing that yellow elementary student cap had walked up to him and pulled on his sleeve.

"My mama said you're a big bad villain boy," he'd stammered, looking at Katsuki with quivering lips. Katsuki wasn't sure if this kid had balls of steel or no self-preservation instincts because what kind of brat walks up to a dude they're told is dangerous to ask point-blank if they're a villain. "Are you gonna 'xplode me?"

When Katsuki says it took every bit of willpower not to indeed explode the brat and get himself charged with murder, he means it. He'd stuck for a safer: "Fuck off you little pest!" and shook the whimpering thing from his sleeve until the little monster's mother had popped out of nowhere and taken him away, apologizing and begging Katsuki not to hurt them.

And maybe seeing her tear-stained face, terrified of a threat that wasn't there shook him up a little. On his way back home his eyes had caught on the T-turn, only a few blocks left of which was the apartment complex a certain nerd lived in, facing, two streets away, the park they used to 'play' in as kids.

You're a big bad villain boy

Fucking Deku.

(In the kitchen of said apartment, a green-haired boy choked on his food.)

He stops going out at all the next day after some freak on the subway thought it would be fun to try and feel him up. He almost gets in hot water with the police for near blasting her face-off, and he doesn't even bother checking the internet for the new videos of him being a hooligan that have surely spread.

This new shut-in life, it's boring.

Katsuki's the type of guy who's always kept busy. A quirk like Explosion is much harder to control than he makes it seem, and from the moment he got it and began looking up to All Might he'd trained every spare moment of the day. Katsuki is gifted at a lot of things, but he's also smart, and any smart person knows that talent or desire alone is not enough to move forward in life.

That's a reason he hated middle school Deku, the shitstain was always going on and on about how he'd go to UA and be a hero but did nothing to prepare for it other than his stalker notebooks.

The thing is, outside of heroics, quirks don't matter as much as you'd think. Sure they might help steer a path in life, say if you have a sound-based quirk you might be pushed towards music, if you have a healing quirk you might be encouraged to be a medic. But that's like any other plain old talent. It's something that makes your choice easier. At the end of the day, you can still become a doctor with a sound quirk, you'll just have to work harder than someone with a healing one.

Besides, for most jobs quirks are entirely useless. His dad's nitric acid quirk does nothing to help in fashion design, or anywhere outside of the chemistry field. You can become the richest CEO in the world even if your quirk is shitting rainbow shit. Because, with quirk use so heavily regulated and most quirks being well, lame-ass quirks instead of actual strong powers, there's not much difference. Even discrimination is based more on appearance than power-level of quirk, which is why people with mutant-type quirks have been campaigning for more rights for years. It's them and the people with quirks deemed too villainous that bear the brunt of society's ire.

When it comes to hero work though, quirks are everything. And while heroics is a very sought-out profession —it's the standard answer when you ask a kid what they want to be when they grow up— very few make it, and fewer are competent at all. Most people are content with regular jobs, and most kids grow out of their hero-phase after elementary school, or maybe fail some hero-course mock exam and realize they aren't cut out for it. Katsuki is sure that every single extra at his old class who claimed they wanted to be a hero has moved on toward becoming an accountant or some shit. It's normal.

Someone with no quirk at all like Deku is an anomaly, yes. He'd get side-eyed and teased, but Deku is smart, as much as it pains Katsuki to admit, and if he'd picked some other dream job people would stop paying attention to his quirkless-ness and realize that. No, the whole reason Deku was constantly being stepped on in elementary and middle school was that he was delusional. He didn't just insist on being a hero with no power, he didn't even attempt to make up for it by preparing physically.

That wimpy Deku had been planning to take the UA practical entrance exam with zero combat training and muscle mass in the minus. If that kid had tried to hit a robot it would've busted his knuckles. Katsuki was right in the end, wasn't he? Quirkless Deku would never have passed that exam. He'd been telling Deku the cold hard truth. The only reason he got into the hero course is the overpowered quirk he

pulled out of his ass. Or rather… 'received from someone'.

When Deku told him that after the humiliating first loss, Katsuki was sure he'd come over to look down on him in typical Deku fashion. But the more he thought about it, the more the clues began piling up. Frogger pointed out how similar Deku's quirk was to All Might's, Icy Hot asked if Deku was the hero's secret love child, All Might always seemed to be paying extra attention to Deku. All Might was there on the day of the Sludge Incident, and it was after that that Deku began bulking up.

Yeah, it clicks. It's obvious in hindsight. Deku yells motherfucking SMAAASH every time he attacks, and there was no way UA was Deku's first proper meeting with All Might, the nerd would've shitted himself in the middle of class if that was the case.

There's the problem of how the fuck a quirk can be passed down, but it's Deku and fate loves him, Katsuki wouldn't be surprised if he got a dozen more quirks because he has the great virtues of recklessness and overgrown tear ducts.

But if All Might chose him… he must be doing something right that Katsuki isn't. Katsuki hasn't been able to bear even looking at Deku for the longest time. There's something there that makes him want to squirm, some other reason why Deku is such an eyesore other than his delusion…

He stabs his chopsticks into a piece of pork. This must be the dozenth time he's ruminated over the cluster fuck that is his relationship with Deku during this self-imposed isolation. He's angry that his thoughts keep coming back to this, but sitting on his bed with a cardboard cup of spicy pork instant ramen in his lap, he doesn't have anything better to do.

Uneventful would be putting it lightly, Katsuki doesn't even remember the last time he's had so much convenience store food; he hasn't lived off Seven-Eleven ever since his parents left him alone at home for a whole two weeks when he was seven and he had to finish their entire supply of frozen meals. He learned how to cook after that.

The cup of noodles is finished, and he forces himself to get up and put it away. The kitchen cupboards are looking sparser by the day, even though he hasn't been eating much. He'll have to go out and restock soon. It feels too pathetic to admit he's dreading it.

The following morning, Katsuki wakes up with a killer headache and a fever of thirty-nine degrees for the first time in seven years. It's true that he hasn't been doing the best at self-care, often going to sleep with wet hair and feeding himself junk food only when he's hungry His motivation is dead. But getting sick? God has it out for him.

A scouring of the bathroom medicine cabinet leaves him with packets of expired pills -his parents rarely get sick either- and he realizes with a groan he's going to have to head to the local pharmacy to get some pain killers and antipyretics. The weakling part of him that has taken charge as of late whispers he should leave it, that he might as well let himself die from something as dumb as a fever in this day and age since his existence doesn't contribute much to the world anyway.

It's out of spite against said worthless voice that he gets up regardless of the fuzzy cotton in his skull and shivers breaking out over his skin. He grabs a couple of grocery bags with him, figures he should do double duty, and buy some shit to refill the kitchen cupboards with.

The neighborhood pharmacy is closed, because of course it is, since Katsuki's body decided it would be fun to get sick on a fucking Sunday. He's forced to head for the big chain pharmacy the next block over, the one that's open twenty-four seven.

The sounds of a scuffle trickle into his ears and he pauses, peeking into a narrow alleyway to the side of the street. It smells of nauseating decay; the brick walls are covered in a thin brushing of moss and right there, at the back, a tallish, lanky man is towering over a much smaller person.

"C'mon old lady," he jeers, "let go already—"

He shifts a little and Katsuki can see the woman clearly now, grey hair pinned up, thick glasses sitting on a wrinkled face. She and the man are in a tug of war, both gripping what looks like a tiny purse and pulling on opposite sides. Katsuki is frozen for a moment due to the sheer ridiculousness of the situation. Is this an attempted mugging? How weak is this dude that he can't even beat a ninety-year-old?

A glint of metal reflects against the brick, and Katsuki watches as the man's silver hair goes taught, before straightening into hundreds of needles. This isn't any old purse snatcher.

"—the crux of being a hero isn't just victory Bakugou. It's kindness. It's offering others strength and hope. It's making them feel comfortable and safe. If you can't comprehend that, if you insist on doing the opposite, you

need to reevaluate why you even want to be a hero in the first place."

But he isn't anything Katsuki can't handle either, so he charges, propelling himself with his quirk even though it's kind of illegal and barrels straight into the dude, sending his body slamming into the wall with a little more force than necessary.

Fuck, that hurt. He rubs his nose where it smashed against brick, then whirs around to check on the villain. Surely enough, the guy is passed out but still breathing a few handful centimeters away. Mission success, even though Katsuki's fever-addled body is lacking its usual finesse.

"Thank you, boy," calls the old woman, already up and dusting off her bright yellow-dotted black walking yukata. "Hand me my walking cane will you."

Katsuki stares, brain slowed. The tapping of her sandaled foot against concrete snaps him out of it, and he feels around for the cane. It's rolled to the corner of the alley. He grabs it with an extended hand and holds it out to her, still unmoved from the spot where he'd crashed into the wall. She takes it and leans into it like a crutch, eyes sizing up Katsuki with intensity.

They're slathered in yellow gold color, from irises to eyelashes. Katsuki suppresses a shiver. She kind of reminds him of Recovery Girl.

"Are you alright?" she asks after a beat. Katsuki feels flush, well, even more than before, and his face morphs into a sneer, suddenly aware of his current position, collapsed like a fool after he barreled into the wall.

"I'm fine!" he says too quick, shifting to a standing position. Those unsettling eyes narrow, before shifting away.

"Settle down, you youngins these days are always on the defensive," she mutters.

"Hah?"

A sigh.

"Boy, are you lost?" What's this, twenty-one questions? For the first time in these five minutes, Katsuki feels she recognizes him. It's a stupid inquiry. He's not five. It's easy enough to navigate Musutafu. So he says: "No."

She sighs again, damn her, then unhooks the cover of her little purse, sticking a sleeved arm elbow deep into it. That should not fit in there and neither should the metal tin she's near-ripping the hem of the purse to take out. She unscrews the cap of the cylindrical tin and offers him a cookie.

"Thank you for saving me." Katsuki's irrational anger flares. Is she messing with him? She chokes through a sudden coughing fit before clearing her throat. "Take it, I baked them myself. It's rude to reject gratitude food from an elder." He doesn't trust her, and the overwhelming smell of the fresh cookies is making him want to puke.

"Fine, be that way." She huffs, putting the cookie back in the tin and the tin back in that tiny purse like a magician. Instead, she holds out a business card. It's pure yellow, with a single stamped phone number in the back. "It's the card for my shop," she says, "I don't give this to many people you know, but you saved me, so I owe you a debt. Call if you ever need help and I'll pay you back for today."

Before Katsuki can start yelling about never needing help, she turns heel, walking out of the alley with a slight limp.

"Oi, what about this guy?" Katsuki calls, referring to the villain still limp against the wall.

"Leave him." She waves a withered hand. "He can get up on his own when he wakes up." Then she's disappeared behind the corner of the street.

Well, that's irresponsible, Katsuki thinks. What if this guy ends up doing something worse than purse-snatching? They're just gonna let him get away? He thinks about leaving him tied up, but what if no one finds him and he starves in this alley and it'll be Katsuki's fault? He groans, positive his brain is making this way more complicated than he needs to be. He opts to tie the dude up with a crusty length of rope discarded by the trash can in the alley, then uses the payphone around the corner to call the police.

"Hello," he starts in a voice pitched an octave too high, purposefully shaky. He's paranoid about getting recognized and seeing the new headlines 'Delinquent Bakugou Katsuki strikes again. Beats up civilian and leaves them to rot in alley.' Yeah, no thanks. As embarrassing as this is to do, his forty-degree boiling head cannot think of anything better. "This guy tried to snatch my purse. A young man showed up and tied him up." He recites a rough address. "Come get him or

whatever."

"Ma'am, wait a second, you—"

"I don't care you shi- er, I mean, I'm very busy young man, so pick him up to avoid yourself future trouble. He's gonna say he didn't do anything, but don't trust him. You have truth quirk people over there, yeah? Have them ask him and you'll see. You're welcome."

Katsuki snaps the payphone back in its place before the guy can reply. He did his job. He might as well have hand-delivered the guy to the police station. It's their fault if they don't deal with him now. His head still hurts. Right. The pharmacy.

Katsuki comes out of Seven-Eleven with two bags of enough food to feed a small army and another with all his medical supplies. The pharmacist had not been subtle with hiding his apprehension, treating him noticeably worse than the customer Katsuki watched him head with before. Fuck that guy.

Home is more than half an hour's walk away from this store, but his stomach demands food now. It's rare that he's hungry. Fatigue is all he's been able to feel lately. That and the occasional intense, consuming rage. He's given up on any sort of balanced meal plan. He can't even remember if he'd eaten anything at all today, and yesterday he had cups of that calorie bomb of a ramen that would've never touched his old, meticulous diet with a ten-foot pole, for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Katsuki's stomach growls again and he begrudgingly halts his pace. His knees feel like they're gonna give in. Okay, he'll stop at a bench and have one of the steamed buns he got. It'll be quick. He looks stupid, alone, flushed, and surrounded by groceries on a sidewalk bench, but people these days seem to think he looks like a freakshow no matter what he does, so does it matter? He tears into the steamed bun with a vengeance.

He isn't sure what possesses him to click open his phone he swipes away the dozen missed calls from his dad, much less login to the hero forum app.

Katsuki has been avoiding that app, as frustrating as it feels to be behind on news. Reason number one is that he's been forced to unsubscribe from a dozen news networks that thought it would be fun to stick their nose in his private business. The hero forum is user-run,

so it doesn't take a genius to guess people on there will be even more ruthless.

A handful of notifications; messages from private numbers; pop onto the screen. Reason two, since his phone number presumably got leaked these messages haven't stopped. He turns off notifications every time and every-time new numbers send shit. Just the usual, "Go die in a ditch," and, "You look sexy in chains come over so I can ruin you," or, "I saw you on the street today wanted to bash you into the pavement," or, "You're a stain on hero society."

Stupid extras fancy themselves self-righteous doing this shit. Loser-ass behavior.

—take a swan dive off the roof and maybe you'll be born with a quirk in your next life—

He swallows air and it tastes horrible.

Loser-ass behavior.

Swiping all the notifications away, he scrolls down his feed, the appreciation posts for All Might and news of Edgeshot's recent major arrests familiar in a way that makes his chest warm. He's missed these, feels kind of dumb that he's been too much of a coward to open the app for days.

That is until he stumbles onto a post from the UA-watch sub-forum titled ***Shinsou Hitoshi, a new rising hero student?***

He taps on it against better judgment. A picture of the purple dude Katsuki remembers from the Sports Festival fills the screen.

[…] Shinsou, a student in the GenEd course had a good showing at this year's Sports Festival; one of the greatest runs for a GenEd student in recent record. It looks like he has a mental based quirk, which means that, more likely than not, the only reason he didn't make it into the heroics course is the fact that this year's practical entrance exam, one centered around robotic enemies, put him and other participants with non-combat quirks at a disadvantage.

Could Shinsou prove the system wrong? I think so, he seems like a competent choice if a little lacking in hand to hand. We've all been wondering who's going to replace Bakugou in class 1-A[…]

The phone cracks and the screen fizzles to black against Katsuki's

steel-grip fingers. He feels the telltale tightening in his chest.

It’s over, isn’t it?

That childish, hopeful, hidden-but-there part of him that had been whispering this was all a lie, a stupid mistake, a nightmare, that he'd be back at UA with a personal apology for wasting his time when he woke up; it's doused with a bucket of ice-cold water.

Katsuki’s stay at UA has been a constant string of losses, and a single word from Deku was all it took for him to lose everything.

He’s acutely aware of the fact that his breaths are coming out more like wheezes, and it’s enough that passers-by have started to notice. He can’t- he refuses to break down in the middle of this very public park and find people snickering at videos of him being pathetic all over the internet in a couple of hours. So he grabs his bags of things and, steamed bun forgotten runs as fast as his shaky legs will go back home to scream into a pillow in peace. Fuck.

The heat of the cloudless sky prickles at his skin as the edges of his vision begin to fuzz.

Katsuki stumbles into the driveway in a daze, trampling all over the neat lawn. He’s so out of it that he doesn’t notice the knocked-over flower vases by the gate or the fallen mailbox.

He doesn’t notice that, but he does notice the front door pushing open beneath his fingers without the need to turn the key, even though he’s sure he locked it three times over before leaving. If possible, his breathing stutters further. His blurry eyes take in the hall slowly, nothing is out of place yet everything’s wrong. He dumps the bags onto the floor, vision fuzzy, and tip toes into the living room. And fuck *that’s a motherfucking stranger sitting on his couch can this day get any worse--*

The stranger’s skin is a garish map of grafts, held together by dozens of staples, and he stands with a calmness that’s the exact opposite of how Katsuki feels. His limbs are heavy and groggy but he moves on instinct, igniting an explosion in front of him, aiming at nothing in particular yet hoping it will somehow make this stranger disintegrate.

He knows the moment it goes off that he’s lost, and when the flash clears, Katsuki can barely make out the stranger’s words over the deafening thrum of his own sped-up heartbeat.

“How the mighty have fallen, eh, kid?”

An unfamiliar hand closes around his neck and he doesn’t even have time to inhale before a very much familiar black mist engulfs the room and everything disappears.

Chapter End Notes

> Did I do an okay job with Bakugou's characterization? I have a hard time handling the more delicate aspects of how he'd react in a situation like this without falling into the trap of cringy melodrama. It might seem a bit over the top or OOC that Izuku would tell Aizawa about his and Bakugou's pasts, but I thought that he could end up doing that if they failed the exam since Bakugou was the uncooperative one and Izuku is under pressure as All Might's successor. I thought he might momentarily snap in a situation like that. Are there any warning tags you think should be added to the main tags? Please leave thoughts in the comments, I'm always happy to read them :]

Chapter 2: Evil boy band training camp...? 1.0

Chapter Summary

> Katsuki does not want to be part of the emo boy band.
>
> (Pretty heavy trigger warnings for blood, a lot of violence, torture, self-deprecating thoughts, non-consensual drug use, described suicide in a dream sequence... it's not fun. Please if you can be triggered in any way by these things keep yourself safe and do not read. If you think there is a trigger I should've added please let me know in the comments I'm not someone easily triggered by written media so I have a tendency to miss these!)

Chapter Notes

> Helloo, I've been reeling from the recent developments in the canon manga and also itching to post this so here we are.
>
> All the feedback from the previous chapter made me really happy. Thank you! A lot of you seemed very interested in the Katsuki & Eri tag and, yup there will be a fluffy sibling relationship between them in the story, just not quite yet hehe. I also have a lot of other plans so keep ur eyes out.
>
> But anyway, I've re-written this chapter like 48463 times (I'm still not sure I'm happy with it) and the end result was over 11k words, so I figured I should split it up to keep all the chapters in that digestible 4-6k range. I end up writing way more than I intended with these chapters idk it gets out of control TT. Part one of Katsuki's stay with the LoV.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The polished wood of the windowless bar grows more stifling every day. Amber headlights flicker on and off, lighting rows of expensive yet never drunk alcohol bottles with an eerie glow. Katsuki wishes he could rub his fever-sensitive nose, it smells like unwashed villains trying to drown their stink in perfume in here. No such luck, his hands are bound and have been bound for three days.

The deranged blonde schoolgirl, Toga, sits cross-legged atop the bar's counter, dozens of glasses laid out in front of her. She isn't allowed alone with Katsuki, a wise decision judging by all the "I want to cut him." comments, so spandex alien, Twice, is also here, pretending to

read something while paying careful attention to what Toga is doing.

Glass clinks as she piles the crystal cups on top of each other like a house of cards. The construction is solid, she nudges it with her knee by accident no less than four times yet it never falls. By the time she's finished, the construction has grown so tall it almost obstructs her from Katsuki's view. Twice has given up on acting like he cares about literature, and has dragged a stool from under the bar to sit on and admire the view.

Toga stands on tiptoes on the counter, then extends one foot out so it catches on the railing of the liquor display and reaches upward for one of the wines on the top shelf, feet never touching the ground. It's an awful lot of effort to reach a wine bottle, but Toga's mind doesn't work like most people's. Katsuki has learned by now that she's quick on her feet, wagers she could take a good deal of the rest of the League in a quirkless fight. He still has no idea what her quirk is. Blood-related for sure, though that could mean anything.

"Careful Toga-chan," says Twice, "Kurogiri will have our heads if you break anything," continues a different voice. Twice is much less of a mystery, he's a pretty straight-forward guy, oddly kindhearted in certain ways for a villain. He seems to care a lot about the rest of the League; Katsuki guesses he's lonely.

Toga ignores him, giggling a little as she returns both feet to the counter with a twirl, falling back into a cross-legged position. She stabs the wine's cork with the tip of her knife in childish glee, removing the cork and flicking it away with a pop. "Hey wait," warns Twice, voice on edge, "We aren't supposed to touch thos—"

And she's started to spill the entire contents of the bottle into the very top glass of her structure, liquid sloshing in big gulps. The deep burgundy tints the inside of the crystal, and as the first cup overflows liquid pours to the glasses on the next level below, then the next, then the next, and so on until it's running out of levels and starts spilling onto the bar counter, painting the wood red.

"Pretty—" she sing-songs, staring at the makeshift fountain. Twice has stopped berating and seems mesmerized himself. It is pretty, Katsuki has to admit, as long as he ignores the colossal waste of what's probably expensive ass wine. "—like a fountain of blood." She makes a weird noise, and never mind what he said earlier, Katsuki hates it now.

Once all the wine has settled either into the glasses or onto the poor floor, the fountain becomes a whole lot more boring. They don't bother to clean it of course, you expect villains to be responsible? They start bickering over the logistics of making such a fountain with actual human blood, and bar the disturbing subject matter, it's a lot like Spark Plugs and Raccoon Eyes when they were being dumb together. *These two are friends.*

"Say Katsuki..." Toga spins over. "You're smart, right? How much blood do you think I'd need to suck to make a fountain-like that?" She brandishes her needle-shaped tool Katsuki assumes is used for said blood sucking. His head pounds, and in that feverish daze, he's surprised to find himself considering the question.

"Toga-chan, remember not to touch him," warns Twice. "Why's the little brat not swearing," says his other voice.

Toga squints at this, getting way too close for comfort, barging in on Katsuki's personal space. She puts a soft, kinda small hand on Katsuki's forehead and it reminds him that she can't be much older than him. And to be fair, her blood obsession seems to be a compulsion born from her power, she got the short end of the stick. Good luck avoiding villainy with a quirk that does that.

"He's hot and sweaty," she says, and well, no shit, Katsuki still has a fever.

"He's still sick?" retorts Twice, "Well no one gave him any medicine…" he replies to himself. "Ew, what if he pukes all over and gets everyone sick—"

"Fuck you," Katsuki says, and forces a sneeze on Toga's shirt, just to be petty. She looks from him to the shirt and laughs, a scary fake-cute thing. The expression on her face makes him shiver and tense. "He's fun, I want to cut him *so* bad Jin-kun."

"Yeah, no, please don't. I'm supposed to be making sure you don't." Spandex alien gets up to rummage the drawers by the bar for something until the sound of the door clicking open startles him out of it. Katsuki groans.

Surely enough, it's Shigaraki and Mr.Compress back from whatever villain bullshit they were up to, Warp-fuck tailing close behind. Mr. Compress begins chastising Toga and Twice for all this disorder, while Kurogiri and Handman seem nonplussed. Not that Katsuki is surprised, Shigaraki returned to the bar wounded once and he whined like a brat

as he bled out on the floor while Kurogiri ignored him to dry shot glasses that were used maybe once in a year.

Today, Kurogiri warps the mess away. No wonder the guy is the babysitter. Shigaraki approaches Katsuki, as dry and unkempt as ever. He begins the usual tune.

“Changed your mind yet, you should become part of our party now.” Katsuki glowers. See this is why he tolerates Twice and Toga more than the others. Out of everyone who frequents the bar often, they don’t bother with this recruitment bullshit. Twice has steered clear of Katsuki after he ate a blast to the face on the first day they tried this business, and Toga is so far removed from normality Katsuki doesn’t think she gives a rat’s ass about any cause or ideology beyond making people bleed. They leave him alone. Shigaraki by comparison is persistent.

“Fuck off, I said no a million times already,” Katsuki yells in his face. The hand the guy calls father obscures all of it. How the fuck can he see… talk about impractical. Shigaraki counts off the amazing arguments for why Katsuki should join their evil boy band, for the millionth time. Society failed you something something, you got your chance stolen yada yada, they tied you up in public like a criminal or whatever.

But then he starts saying something new. “They already see you as a villain, your school, your old teachers, the public. Everyone but you sees it. Bullying that kid, you’ve already built a ton of XP. Why do you make it harder on yourself by wanting to change skill halfway through playing?”

Katsuki’s protests bubble away in his throat and he snaps his open mouth shut. For the first time in three days, Shigaraki’s drivel hits an uncomfortable spot. The news, Aizawa, his mom, that kid on the street, all of them do agree. When people looked at him they saw the exact opposite of what Katsuki wanted them to see. Fuck, he’s so fucked.

Everyone but you sees it

And damn, who gave Handsy today’s script? He’s much better than usual at emotional manipulation.

“You’re a beginner-level-villain in denial.”

Katsuki feels even more ill. Shigaraki continues to drone on and on

about how they can help him rack up the points and climb up the ranks, unaware that every word out of his mouth is counterproductive because Katsuki is busy having a mini-breakdown. Anger at everything in the world flares in his chest, and he snarls at Shigaraki to shut his trap. The villain pauses, and for a split second Katsuki's stomach drops as the sensation that he's pushed his luck too far and Shigaraki will do something dangerous like decay his face off lights his nerve ends.

"Kurogiri, this isn't working," the guy complains instead, "I'm tired of him and he's annoying."

It takes every bit of Katsuki's self-control not to snap at this A-level murder-capable man-child.

"He can't be persuaded?"

"Clearly not," chimes in Mr. Compress from where he's leaning haughtily against the only brick wall of the bar.

"Sensei will have him then. The doctor said he has plans for the boy if we don't manage to get him on our side by will."

Hold on, hold on. What? Sensei as is that voice on the computer that orders Shigaraki around and might be the big boss of everyone here? The one that's rich and powerful enough to let this very expensive room filled with very expensive liquor waste away in the hands of someone like Shigaraki? And this is the first time they mention a doctor. A couple more villains enter through the open door, but Katsuki pays them no mind.

"Oi, what the fuck are you talking about?!" he demands.

Shigaraki seems amused all of a sudden. "Oh, oh, if he's going to the doctor… Sensei is so smart. He'll be a perfect Nomu." He laughs a little as Katsuki's blood runs cold. "Top UA student one day and mindless weapon of the villains the next. Oh that's a fun storyline."

He ignores Katsuki's ever-increasing protests in favor of digging a phone from his pocket. Holding it with four fingers, he dials a number and places it next to his ear. "Sensei, you can have the Bakugou kid. He's boring."

"Given up already Tomura? You will have to work on your tenacity to improve—" But there's not one bit of scolding in that voice. If anything Sensei sounds pleased, like this is the turn of events he's both

wanted and expected. Whoever he is, the sound of him makes Katsuki's skin crawl. Shit. They're seriously taking him to some insane doctor so he can be made into a brainless hunk of meat. No way. No way.

Katsuki ignites an explosion inside the cuffs even though he knows they're quirk-resistant. It hurts him more than it hurts the fortified metal. He tries to bash them back and forth so they break. Nope. They're the same type as the ones the UA staff used on him at the Sports Festival, and fuck knows he'd tried everything against those. Mr. Compress's gaze feels pitying even through that ridiculous mask and Katsuki unleashes a string of every colorful expletive he knows in an attempt to clear his buzzed brain.

"—Today? Sure, I'll have Kurogiri drop him off," says Shigaraki into the phone. Great. He's gonna die. "Twice, unlock his restraints."

"Huh, why me?" questions Twice from the stool he hasn't moved from, this time actually reading that book. "He'll fight back again, no way."

"Fine. Muscular, you do it." Who the actual fuck is Muscular? As if to answer this question, this very well... muscular dude with a haircut and color too much like Katsuki's own and a mechanical eye pops into view, eyeing Shigaraki then him with a cocky grin. "It's fine if you rough him up a little," Shigaraki allows. "Doctor won't care."

Muscular, a very lame fucking name for a villain, proceeds to unlatch the cuffs. Katsuki stands up calmly and waits for a bit, pretends he's gonna cooperate, not unlike what he'd done on that first night of captivity, then pops an explosion to Muscular's face. The villain falls from the force of the stronger than usual blow but Katsuki doesn't even have two seconds to think as, before the flash of light from the blast has even disappeared, a large hand grasps his calf.

It takes him longer than it should to realize the scream piercing the stale air of the bar is his own and he collapses against the wine-stained hardwood floor. The exterior skin of his lower left leg looks remarkably okay, even though the tibia and fibula inside must be broken straight in half, judging by the distorted shape bent and twisted at an unnatural angle. He swallows his queasiness and attempts to get up again, but the leg is so detached putting even the slightest bit of pressure on it feels like igniting a million hot needles against his skin.

“Damn,” someone mutters.

“Try that again and I’ll break the other too,” Muscular threatens, mechanical eye spinning as a maniacal grin stretches across his face. Katsuki doesn’t doubt he will.

The villain grabs him by the sides and lifts him into the air. He fights with all he’s got, he does, but pretty soon they’re out of the confined barroom and Mistfucker extends his mist, warping them away to a whole new place.

It’s a large warehouse with a vaulted metal roof, barely lit by anything except some thin strips of LED in the far upward corners. Kurogiri and Muscular seem to have no problem navigating through the dark, and they pass through rows and rows of giant vats filled with pungent substances and glass tanks with grotesque, half-baked monsters floating inside. Their elongated limbs fall limp against the glass and the liquid within bubbles with a fluorescent glow. Katsuki jumps as they pass a tank where the Nomu has fallen forward, six-eyed face and exposed brain squished against the transparent boundary.

That’s gonna be you in a little bit .

God.

They stop in front of the back section of the warehouse. On one side there’s what appears to be a cable box, dozens of wires big and small jutting from it and snaking in every direction. On the other, there’s a nondescript door, white, metallic, and way too normal for a place like this. Muscular presses a red doorbell-looking button near the handle, and soon the metal vaults open, revealing a stout and short figure.

The lighting inside the little room is much brighter than that of the warehouse proper, so it takes a bit for Katsuki’s pain slowed brain to process the difference and see the doctor. He’s an older man, going by his grayed hair. Chubby and short, wearing a pair of ridiculous gold-framed vaguely-gear-shaped glasses with colored lenses. He’s familiar, Katsuki notes, but starving from three days of no food and pumped full of pain as he is, he can’t place from where exactly.

“I’ve been expecting you,” he says, whether to him or the two villains Katsuki can’t tell. “Bring him over here.” He motions towards the corner of the building right in front of his room. They step over and Katsuki must be going crazy because there’s nothing fucking there. Ah, the doctor leans to open some sort of latch, then props up a piece of the floor. A trapdoor.

They walk down a narrow set of stairs into a narrow hallway. The glare of bright hospital-esque lights renders Katsuki momentarily blind, as his eyes squint on instinct and his head spins. The short hallway is lined with three doors. If the warehouse was pungent and dusty, this place smells clean to a freaky degree. The walls and floors that look like they're made of pure, polished steel are unblemished, and it reeks of medical alcohol and antiseptic and bleach. At least the bar in all its lived-in-by-too-many-murderers feel actually seemed like a place where humans stayed. Katsuki never thought he'd want to go back.

The end of the hall houses cubbies of various sizes, and the doctor drags the handle of one and it comes free of the wall, rolling with him like a sort of caddy. He opens the topmost drawer and doesn't have to rummage inside for any supplies, as they're all lined up in foam inlets. He picks a syringe, examines it for a beat, then uncaps the top with practiced accuracy as he turns to them.

Katsuki squirms against Muscular's grip, but he doesn't get to hear the doctor's words as a sharp poke permeates through his upper arm and his eyes fall shut for good.

When he closes his eyes his gakuran is black, the buttons a shiny gold. The top one is loose. He finds himself walking in front of Aldera, by the Koi pond he likes flinging Deku's notebooks into, not in full control of his body. It's like he's a video-game character who's started their cut-scene, a puppet on strings. The water is murky. His hands want to crackle. Time for the arcade, his brain says, Go to the arcade. He walks.

He walks until there's a gasp from behind him, and he whips his head around to find no one. Instead, his eyes zero in on a shadow atop the building. Familiar, swaying. He wants to call out, yell out a futile 'no' but his mouth feels glued shut. The shadow falls and he can't move to stop it, to catch it, his shoes sewn to the pavement.

The thud of human hitting concrete echoes in his ears as red erupts everywhere. Only now can he move, legs taking him closer to the scene despite his head yelling to get away away away. Unseeing green eyes stare at him, emerald hair colored black from where his skull has cracked open. The smell of iron is so strong he has to stop himself from vomiting with a hand to the face; the puddle of blood so large it makes his shoes stick to the ground with squelching noises.

He wants to look away but can't, some sick fascination keeping his eyes magnetized to twisted limbs and splattered entrails and a body so ruined it can not possibly be human. Eyes color for a moment, meeting his and sending a chill all the way to his toes.

"I took your advice Kacchan," says the voice that's tailed him for a decade. Crackled, blue lips upturn to smile at the corners.

Becoming a Nomu is, as it turns out, not as simple an affair as one would think. Why couldn't they fucking pump him full of drugs and shove him into some tank to hibernate or something? He'd thought those Nomus upstairs looked pathetic when he first saw them, all flailing and tired of life. But Katsuki gets it now, he does, he also thinks he'd rather be dead sometimes.

They are so confident in his inability to escape he hadn't even had his clothes removed, though his shirt has by now been reduced to tatters and the few stray coins and cards in his pockets aren't going to be much help. And oh he's tried to escape, tried to cook up a plan the moment he woke up on that first day (or night, he doesn't know anymore) here, but not only is this place designed to be unbreachable, but he's also been cuffed to the wall and under the constant effects of drugs and fever and hunger to the point of barely being able to stand.

His cell is like an elongated box made of four seamless polished steel walls. The light never turns off, and when the doctor leaves him between sessions, he has no idea how much time has passed. The walls are shockproof, because of course they are, though that hasn't stopped Katsuki from attempting to blast them to smithereens the few times he's been able to use his quirk. He tugs on plastified hands. The doctor makes him wear these gloves that are melted against his palms, clogging up his sweat glands like some superpowered deodorant.

He's tried to get them off, but without whatever solvent the doctor brings in at certain times, they're like a second layer of skin. And the stuff that's needed to melt them off is strong as fuck, it makes them bubble from light purple into pitch black in seconds. The only reason Katsuki still has hands at all is his own skin's near invulnerability. Most people's bodies are adapted to their quirks after all. What use would Explosion be if he blasted his arm clean off and his skin burned every time he used it? Nitroglycerin explosions aren't exactly cold.

So yeah, Katsuki can't use his quirk at all, only rarely will the doctor come in with his tub of solvent to take the suppressant gloves off. And

it's only because he wants to test Katsuki's resistance to his own explosions, which happens in a complicated box-contraption where it's either ignite sweat directly against skin or get head submerged in water for an indefinite amount of time.

The very first time the doctor had him do this, Katsuki had been stubborn. He'd stay underwater and the doctor would give in at some point. There was no way he'd be allowed to die that easily, right? Except he'd passed out in that water and the doctor looked more amused than anything when he woke up again. Made it very clear that Katsuki dying would be a minor inconvenience at most. Nomus made out of corpses turn out even better, apparently.

Katsuki learned two things. One, feeling like you want to die and actually wanting it enough to go against basic human instinct and give up are very different things. Two, explosions against skin hurt much less than drowning. He knows that igniting the equivalent of a Howitzer inside that very shockproof one-meter by one-meter box the doctor makes him shove his hand inside will mangle his arm worse than any shit that fuck Deku ever did, and any bigger a blast would tear it straight off. That's information he now possesses. He isn't sure what he'll ever need it for, but he does possess that information.

He'd thought of his body's remarkable adaptation as a blessing for the longest time, but in the hands of a maniac who's looking to test his every limit and finds a sick fascination in the logistics of his quirk, Katsuki kind of wishes he'd never had any of it at all.

Said maniac is the person responsible for producing all the Nomus, and also 'bodily modifications for the League', whatever that means. He likes to hear himself talk, so he's already let slip to Katsuki that the big boss sensei is a dude called All For One, who is the one 'supplying the quirks', whatever that means. The guy has generational beef with All Might, apparently.

According to the doctor, extensive "medical" testing is a requirement of every high-end Nomu candidate (yes, that's what he calls them), not everyone can handle body modifications and foreign intrusion, much less multiple quirks. You need to know that sort of thing in advance, otherwise, you'd be wasting perfectly good copies of quirks on deadbeat subjects. And quirks are complicated things, the effects they have on the body go far beyond outward power.

So he'd say, but Katsuki's perceptive enough to know that this guy's obsession with Katsuki's particular quirk is more than a little over-the-

top. Does he really need to know the exact time in milliseconds it takes for Katsuki's faster-than-most immune system to heal every level of laceration? Does he really need to test precisely how deep cuts need to go before they stop healing fast? Or how much blood Katsuki can lose before he goes into hypovolemic shock?

He might just be a controlling sadistic motherfucker, that could be it too.

Katsuki watches the beige gruel slosh around as he rotates the polished metal bowl. Of every torture -medical his ass- contraption in here, the food may be the cruelest one. The gruel is packed with powdered vitamins and proteins and carbs and every damn thing that's supposed to be part of a balanced diet, yet it manages to taste worse than nothing. And this is the only food he ever gets. This, only after a 'session'. He has no idea how long it's been since the last session, he's been mostly sleeping. It might be half an hour, it might be three days. Katsuki's got no way to keep track of time and his body clock is entirely out of whack.

The point is, he was given this after the last session, and however long it's been, he hasn't eaten since then. He's got no intention of eating either. Hell, it might've gone bad by now.

Fuck this shit. He crawls over to the corner of his cell. He's crawling because he can't walk. Because last time the doctor visited, the bastard thought it would be fascinating to test if the skin on the soles of Katsuki's feet was similar to that of his palms. If it was as explosion-proof as his palms or could sweat the good stuff too. Safe to say it isn't and can't, and putting the pressure of an entire body on burns is not a pleasant experience.

So he crawls, fuck dignity. The corner of his cell houses the toilet, or rather the hole in the floor. He pours the slop straight down the little drainage pipe, watches it disappear with a pathetic satisfaction. At least this he can still control.

The polish of the now empty metal bowl stares back at him, and for a moment he almost hates this metal stuff more than he hates the food. He flings the bowl away with as much strength as he can muster, and it falls with a clang against the- you guessed it- metallic walls of the cell front. Everywhere he looks his warped reflection stares back, and coupled with no natural light and the pitiful amounts of fresh air in this room; it's going to drive him crazy.

He's starting to find the uncleaned blood and vomit-stained spots of the walls comforting. He's already crazy.

The drugs also help. A colorful variety of them, ranging from party acid to the tiniest kick of heroin. If it exists, it's probably in Katsuki's bloodstream. At least it keeps him entertained.

He's busy thinking of the hundredth unreasonable escape plan when the little window atop the door of his cell snaps open.

"Katsuki," the doctor calls, and Katsuki has never hated his own name more. His body breaks out into tremors, already having formed an unconscious association of the doctor with pain and bullshit, but what he hates, even more, is the way he slumps against the wall, a sick relief spreading through him at the voice of another person, even though it's the one he hates most in the world right now. The thing about humans is, they need interaction. They need stimulation. They'll pick pain over boredom. A session also means fresh water after.

"We're doing a special test today—" *Fucking great.* "—This will only take a few seconds."

The sound of released air-pressure floods the room as a blueish gas sprays from the tiny openings on the ceiling. It smells sickly sweet; he's reminded of Midnight's sleeping gas. Except it's not sleeping gas, it's a paralytic agent. The doctor might get off on his position of power, but he's smart enough to know that Katsuki can very well beat an old man like him to death with his bare hands, even quirkless. That's why he never gets near Katsuki unprepared, and relaxing and paralytic agents are his favorite weapon.

His bones feel heavier than lead in a matter of moments.

Once the fumes have cleared, expelled by bursts of clean air from the holes in the ceiling, the vaulted door shifts open and in walks the doctor along with the black-haired guy Katsuki likes to call Crusty or Overcooked; the one who'd caught him that day. It feels like it was so long ago. Katsuki wonders what he's doing here.

"I've brought Dabi in to test your fire resistance, are you excited?"

"Fuck no!" Katsuki says, though it comes out more like OUWOUW, his mouth is paralyzed too after all.

Deeming Katsuki sufficiently docile, the doctor drags him over to the sit-in-the-wall contraption, the one where they test his explosion

resistance. They put his other arm, the one that isn't mangled with burns, into the box.

"Funnel your fire in there," the doctor instructs, and bright blue fills the box, tinting the room and the two villain's faces. Katsuki's mouth gapes a little, he can feel that pinprick sensation of being burned despite the paralytic, but it isn't so unbearable that he'll scream because of it. The blue is extinguished and the doctor's face is a pure picture of glee. He scrolls notes into his Katsuki-torture booklet.

Katsuki's arm is still ok. It's singed, but nowhere near what would've happened to a normal person were they hit by that.

"He's pretty resistant," says Dabi, voice impressed yet a touch bitter.

"Blue flames on the lower side are about twenty-six-hundred degrees and nitroglycerin blasts can go up to five thousand. Try increasing the heat by a hundred."

So he does, and Katsuki's still fine. The next a hundred is bearable too. It's true that nitroglycerin explosions can go up to five thousand degrees, but that's the ones born from detonation. Katsuki doesn't detonate his nitro to get blasts, he ignites it so it burns. Burn ignited explosions don't get anywhere near as hot. And Katsuki has to admit he can't use the detonation aspect of his quirk well, because it's both dangerous and useless, training it would only lead to wasting time on a move that insta-kills the enemy and causes massive property and collateral damage. Not very hero-like.

Not that there's much of anything hero-like left in him in the first place.

Resistance also doesn't mean invulnerability. By the time the blue reaches three-thousand degrees, it's searing on his skin and he's sweating and it's igniting from the heat alone and forming what could be considered a tiny mass of destruction in a box. The paralytic doesn't let him scream, all that comes out from his throat is choked croaks.

Tears prickle at the corners of his eyes and he can't blink them away. This is so fucking stupid.

The fire stops again for five blessed minutes of relief, then they go one more time as a 'final test'. By the end Katsuki's arm is bubbled red, the doctor is jumping out of his skin in interest and Crusty is literally smoking at the seams, perhaps from quirk overuse.

“Isn’t it such an amazing quirk?” babbles the doctor. Dabi mutters a faint “Yeah…” but his gaze is unreadable.

Chapter End Notes

For anyone who isn't familiar, Gakuran is the style of uniform Katsuki and Izuku wore in middle school, the black top with the stand-up collar and straight cut black pants.

I'll be honest I might've changed the doctor's character a little because tbh I'm not particularly interested in him and just use him as a plot device. Dabi too will be a bit different. Canon is a vague concept. I also tried to keep Katsuki's inner narration not super bleak to avoid the dreaded melodrama, which is where that crack tag comes in. WDYT? Please share thoughts and predictions I always love reading them!

Chapter 3: Evil boyband training camp...? 2.0

Chapter Summary

The emo boyband is prone to oversharing.

Chapter Notes

We're back! I've been doing decent with the schedule so far, but it's easier with the pre-written chapters I only need to edit, so I expect that once we get through this first chunk, things will be more bi-weekly. But for now, here's this humongous chapter. I thought a lot about splitting it up yet again, but I figured, since I have it written, there's no need to have it drag.

A lot happens lol I have no idea what I'm doing.

Uh, triggers are pretty much the same as the last chapter torture, violence, bad thoughts, and insecurity, mentioned parental abuse, drugs, liberal stabbing. I don't go into great detail on the torture sessions, but it is enough to be possibly triggering so be careful.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Kacchan! Wait up!” Deku’s voice is high pitched, his limbs short and stubby, round eyes too big for that face, curls sticking out everywhere. *He’s a kid,* Katsuki thinks. He looks down at his own chubby hands, instinct to explode missing entirely. *I’m a kid too.* It smells of salt, and Katsuki hears the soft lull of waves hitting the shore.

“You hurry up dumbo nerd,” comes out of Katsuki’s mouth even though he didn’t think it. A spectator again, huh? He sits back and watches as little Deku runs across the beach, tiny red-shoed feet sinking into the sand. He trips himself up a total of three times, but, at some point, he’s made it to where Katsuki is sitting.

“Boys, don’t stay in the sun too long!” calls a voice Katsuki hasn’t heard in years. Deku’s mom, Auntie Inko, sits a couple dozen steps away, beneath a beach umbrella where Katsuki’s own mother is rummaging through the cooler. She’s wearing a floral sun-hat and seems worried.

“Don’ worry mama!” says baby Deku now that he’s stopped running, “We used Mr.Mighty!” He means his All Might-themed sunscreen. Katsuki does not remember using Mr.Mighty, but his kid self isn’t

saying anything, so he must've.

"Like the sun'll do anything to us!" Katsuki hears himself yell, "I'll beat 'em up!"

Auntie Inko's face scrunches into a smile so similar to Deku's, eyes pinching at the corners. "Alright, have fun and be careful ok?" Katsuki can't hear what she says to his hag as she uncaps a bottle of Ramune and it begins to fizz in her hands.

"What are we gonna make, Kacchan?" asks Deku, and for a moment, Katsuki is too mesmerized by how genuinely tiny he looks to think about what he's answering. Four freckles on each of his cheeks, All Might-themed swim trunks, gaze too intense, this guy, this guy doesn't change, does he?

"How about a sand-castle?" he answers his own question when it becomes clear Katsuki is too lost in his own head to answer.

"That's stupid," says kid-Katsuki, and the excitement on Deku's face dims. "We're gonna make a superhero fortress!"

"Fo— for—tre…?" he stumbles over the unfamiliar word.

"Fortress dumb Izuku! It's like a big base where the heroes stay." Katsuki draws a house-like thing in the sand to illustrate his point. Deku cranes his neck over and frowns at it.

"It looks like a castle Kacchan…" he mumbles. Katsuki ruins his drawing in frustration, grabs fistfuls of sand, and throws them at Deku's pants. Deku gasps and grabs his own sand to throw at Katsuki.

"Boys!" snaps the hag from under the umbrella, "Behave!"

Deku mumbles an apology while Katsuki feels himself glare at her. He makes a high-pitched noise of frustration. "Look," he says to Deku, "I'll show you what a fortress is like. So let's build it."

Deku loses the long look on his face, now nodding and hanging on to every instruction coming out of Katsuki's mouth. He looks like he's listening to a celebrity or a hero or some sort of idol speaking, and it sends a pang through Katsuki's chest.

They build their castle, er, fortress, fit with two stories and an outer wall and turrets and a moat and a little UA-themed gate. Most of it is somewhat wonky, windows aligned wrong, walls too thick in some

places, and an entire chunk missing from the back where they argued about whether sand balls made a fitting representation for tied villains. The front, he has to admit, looks pretty nice.

Katsuki feels their moms have come behind them, crouching down to their level. “What did you make here, brats?” asks his hag as Inko fiddles with a film camera.

“A castle!” answers Deku on instinct.

“Nuh-uh!” Kid Katsuki nudges him. “It’s a hero fortress!”

“Yeah! Frotress!” His hag laughs fondly. Even though she looks pretty much the same, not a wrinkle on her face, not a hair out of place, she’s missing the dark circles hidden under makeup and the flat frown. She looks carefree. She looks at him like he’s pleasant to be around. She hasn’t looked that way in years.

“It’s very nice,” she says and Katsuki knows she’s lying. *She loved me enough to lie at some point.* Kid Katsuki doesn’t seem to have picked up on this fact, he doesn’t even realize the castle is, outside of the front, kind of ugly in the first place. He grins with pride. “What’s this part?” She points to a square tower decorated with lines and dots, a garage-like door drawn on the front.

“That’s where the heroes keep their cars,” explains Katsuki.

“I made it!” says baby Deku, bouncing up and down in enthusiasm.

Against all odds, Katsuki feels his kid self reach out a hand. It falls on Deku’s head. Ruffles his hair, gentle. Deku doesn’t flinch, doesn’t shrug him away, doesn’t expect an attack, he blinks and a wide smile stretches across his tiny face. “You didn’t do that bad a job nerd. Good job.”

He hears the snap of a shutter and notices that Auntie Inko seems to have figured out the camera. “Let’s get a picture to remember this, alright?” Deku nods and drags Katsuki so they stand behind the castle, still high on that head pat. Katsuki scowls at him, but it comes out fond. Deku laughs. They turn to face the camera.

“Smile!”

The most annoying sessions are the ones where the doctor starts talking bullshit. This might be the seventh they’ve had all in all,

maybe the eight. Keeping count is useless since he gets tortured in his dreams too and trying to discern what's real or not is neigh impossible.

He's splayed like a starfish and strapped to the medical table while he gets poked all over with hot pokers. He isn't sure how the doctor wants him to believe these sessions are solely medical. What the fuck is getting poked at with molten steel supposed to offer on the end of scientific discoveries?

Both his arms have healed, whether it's been a while since they've done any "resistance" tests or it's a product of the doctor's handy library of healing quirks, or both, he's not sure. The doctor does have lots of healing quirks though, nothing like Recovery Girl's of course, but he does have regeneration boosters and anti-infection quirks. The latter is the reason why Katsuki hasn't died already from constant blood loss and untended wounds.

The roundish tip of the poker sears circles into the sensitive scabbed skin on his upper arms and he can't stop hisses from leaving his throat. Every time he swears the poker goes at it harder.

"You know, I've wanted to get my hands on you since you were a child Katsuki," the doctor says. That sense of familiarity he had on the first night here rushes back into him.

"Who… the fuck a-are you?!" he growls. The paralytic today is strong enough to make him flimsy but weak enough that he can still move his mouth to speak and curl his toes from pain.

"You don't remember me? Daruma-sensei of the east Musutafu ward?" Katsuki's eyes widen. "Though I suppose you only visited me once as a child, you never seemed to have problems with your quirk even from an early age."

Memories snap into place. A short visit four-year-old him had deemed unnecessary, beating up- er, bullying Deku with the kid Tsubasa, the chubby one with wings.

"Y-you're Tsubasa's grandfather." Katsuki remembers he hasn't seen Tsubasa in years, the boy had disappeared in their final year of elementary school and unlike spindly fingers, hadn't ended up in the same junior high as Katsuki. Or so he'd thought. "Where- what happened to him…?"

The doctor's stance shifts, as if he's reminiscing. "Oh, he made a

fantastic subject. Didn't have much of a brain, those types are easiest to modify. It's a shame I couldn't give him more than a strength enhancer and the Hero Killer took him down too easy for my liking… But we can't have it all I suppose."

Stain? Katsuki's hazy mind tries to think back to that day the Nomu attacks in Hosu had been all over the news. The ones Deku had been right in the action for while Katsuki wasted away playing dress-up with Best Jeanist. The clip of Stain rising from what appeared to be the dead, taking down a winged Nomu with one swoop and announcing some ideology bullshit had taken the internet by storm back then. That winged Nomu was… Katsuki's chest floods with deep disgust.

"Son- son of a bitch," he chokes out because while he might not have cared much about Tsubasa back then, he'd been another lackey extra, the thought that your acquaintance was turned into a monster by his own grandfather and murdered before he could even turn sixteen is not a pleasant one. The doctor grins a little.

"But it was always you I was interested in Katsuki. I tried to grab you for years yet you evaded me; when I saw you all tied up at the Sports Festival I was overjoyed. It put you on Shigaraki Tomura's radar. I could've never expected UA would expel you and lead you right to my hands," he says, his tone ecstatic.

"You freak- why- why do-" Fuck paralytics and their bullshit effect on his speaking abilities.

"Why you in particular?" he cuts off, "I've been a Quirk Doctor for a dozen decades, I've seen quirks change and grow and evolve, and a quirk like yours; so intricate in its repercussions to the body, it's a wonder you haven't been scouted by the HPSC. It's rare for someone to be so adapted to their quirk that they're near-indestructible. And you, you're so fun to break." His gaze darkens. "I can also tell, by now, who has villainous potential. You were already walking down that path. I could make you even greater."

"Bullshit. I'm going to be the greatest hero—"

"Hero?" He laughs to himself, "I had this patient a decade or so ago, plain looking with a plain mother, but you don't see quirkless kids often these days, so he was fascinating. Imagine my surprise when I see him at the Sports Festival, fit with a powerful quirk." Katsuki's mouth falls open, connecting to who they're talking about. "I still have

the x-ray's in my archive, little Midoriya Izuku was as quirkless as they come."

The story pauses so he can heat up the poker again.

"And desperate people get irrational, you know, even two, three years after the quirkless diagnosis he and his mom kept coming to see me, holding on to that fleeting hope something would change. It never did, and by the third year Midoriya-san confessed to me she had no idea how to raise a quirkless child in this day and age, and she feared he was getting bullied. He'd come home with bruises and burns but deny anything ever happened. It was easy to connect the dots when I saw the news." The poker hits his upper shoulder. "Do you know, hero, that you bullied All Might's successor for a decade? How does that feel, little hero?"

I'm the Deku who always does his best.

Deku's bright eyes stare at him in, not pity, but admiration. His little head nods at Katsuki's every word; hides Katsuki's fuck ups. His uniform smokes beneath Katsuki's fingers, their classmates enjoying the show.

And I'm such a fucking loser.

"Interesting, so you knew he is All Might's successor?" Katsuki internally curses at the slip-up. "Did he perhaps reveal the secret of One for All himself? You must matter more to him than you think. And yet you still bullied him—"

Wasn't it ironic that the only person who'd ever believed in his ability to grow had been the same one he abused for a decade?

"He didn't tell me… shit, I… I found out… on… my own"

"Regardless, I study these things," the doctor continues, "you have to be wrong in the head since birth to end up a bully at such a young age. No Katsuki, you were never meant to be anything but a villain."

Shut up. Shut up.

"Oh my, that's a scary face you're making. Did you think you could get away with it? Even if you'd stayed at UA, even if you'd changed, quite the impossible endeavor for humans in my opinion, the past never sleeps. People would find out. And no one would want a former abuser playing the hero. Especially when his victim is the future

number one."

"Were you told you'd be great? Told you were on the right track? Do you think those people couldn't see? Do you think they didn't know it would end this way? Oh, they knew. Everyone knew. They were just waiting for the right moment to sweep the rug from down under you. Don't kid yourself."

Everyone but you sees it

He's right. The fucker is right and that hurts far more than the hottest burn of steel. The teachers at the middle school had watched as he tormented Deku, they'd brought up things that they knew would press Katsuki's buttons mid-class to snicker at his explosive reactions. The ones at UA had watched as he continued to treat Deku badly, letting it build and build until they had enough evidence to cut off ties and break his dream with one easy swoop.

I always knew you were going to fuck it up

They'd been waiting for their suspicions to be fulfilled, for him to be the monster everyone expected, and he'd played right into their hands. He'd been playing into their hands for a decade.

They'd called him heroic for it. And if there's one thing Katsuki despises, it's liars.

The doctor begins putting his tools away. "Greatest hero… you're quite the amusing child. The type who thinks quirks are everything going by how you act. And your quirk is great, it's remarkable. But it could never match up to One for All. That quirk isn't remarkable, it's a *miracle* of power cultivation." The doctor seems to grow giddy. "Your friend Izuku would grow stronger than All Might, much more so, let alone than you, in due time. It's a shame All For One isn't planning to let him live that long."

He turns heel and rolls the caddy along with him, leaving Katsuki strapped to the table and covered in fresh burns. "Think about it Katsuki. I'm doing you a favor. Delusional children who deny their nature and reality are unbearable, don't you agree?"

He walks in the forest. A butterfly net sits on his shoulder. The sun tickles his skin. His strides are wide and confident and unconcerned.

"Wait up Kacchan!" says kid Deku, even though he's a mere two steps

behind Katsuki. “We’ll be heroes together, right?” He presses a tiny hand to Katsuki’s shoulder, then jumps ahead of him, skipping. Neither of them hurries their steps, but the distance between them grows larger and larger.

Even though Katsuki’s broken out into an all-out sprint, there’s a good twenty meters between him and Deku. He’s far enough away that Katsuki should not be able to see him this clearly, but the details of his face remain visible. Without Katsuki realizing it, he and Deku have grown up. He’s wearing those kiddy clothes, despite becoming older.

Deku stops. Katsuki doesn’t, but he never gets closer to him. It’s like there’s an insurmountable trench between them. Deku’s body glows with mint lighting as he stares down Katsuki with clear pity. “I’m sorry you’ve forced me to do this Kacchan, but you could never be a hero.”

Deku knew it too, didn’t he? One part of Katsuki’s mind insists that Deku has never hated him, the other insists that makes no fucking sense. Hadn’t it been Deku after all, who’d waited until the optimal moment to tell on Katsuki, knowing full-well what that would bring? He had to have known, that a word would be all it took to break Katsuki’s dream. And yet he’d gladly watched with those stupid, shiny eyes as Katsuki reveled in delusions.

Katsuki… Katsuki doesn’t understand Deku.

Shigaraki shows up too, a single time. Out of everything that has happened to him, this one is by far the strangest.

What surprises Katsuki is that the doctor cleans his cell beforehand. The guy has a serious cleaning allergy, hates messes, and hates touching them even more, so Katsuki’s blood written words and drawings all over the walls remain intact until that visit when a water system he didn’t even know existed sprays them clean.

The doctor smokes Katsuki in paralytic so strong he needs to be attached to a ventilation system so his lungs keep working, manhandles him into a decent looking blue medical smock, wipes down Katsuki’s face, and makes his hair look cleaner than it has in a while and Katsuki hates every moment of it. Then a bed is rolled inside, one of those hospital typical ones, and it’s kind of sad that on the one day Katsuki gets to have an actual bed he can’t enjoy one bit of it.

He's put on the bed, then attached to about twenty machines that appear to be doing a lot but are in fact doing exactly nothing. Then, to be extra cruel, the doctor shuts Katsuki's eyes and he can't blink them open again. Stuck in that darkness, he's confused, and he doesn't much get what the hell the doctor is playing at here. That is until he hears Shigaraki's voice, and he realizes that Shigaraki has no idea how a Nomu is made and the doctor is doing his best to make the process look much nicer than it is, for some reason.

"Does it take so long to level up?" Katsuki hears Hands say. Is that it? Is he going to get 'body modifications' in the future and the doctor doesn't want him to get scared off by the brutality of the process? That doesn't sound quite right…

"He's a… special case," says the doctor in that voice that makes Katsuki's skin crawl, "Your modifications will be much simpler."

Handsy hums. "Too bad he's so annoying and stubborn. I wanted him to join my party on his own. His stat line is so good…"

Shigaraki *had* been pretty insistent on treating Katsuki okay-ish and convincing him to join of his own free will. In fact, one of his talking points had been the fact that the heroes had chained Katsuki up against his will on national television and that the League would never do such a thing to him (fat load of crap, he'd been chained as Shigaraki was saying that). Besides, how else were the heroes supposed to cement their status and power and show people out of line their place besides necessary humiliation? Handsy did not understand power dynamics clearly.

"He'll be plenty useful as a Nomu, Tomura. We'll shave away those pesky parts of his personality."

Like hell, Katsuki will revel in his pile of steamed trash character for eternity and everyone else will have to suck it.

He hears the doctor's footsteps against the metal floors. There's a disgusting pressure on his face and his eyelids are being forced open, limbs being moved into a different position like he's nothing more than a puppet on strings, or one of those fancy All Might toys with joints. He forgets how bright the light of the room is and when the doctor pulls the oxygen mask away from him, Katsuki can't even pay attention to Handsy's face because he's too busy suffocating. His lungs will literally not work, his diaphragm will not move to suck in air and he's going to choke in a room full of oxygen.

“We are in the puppet stage right now—” Puppet stage his ass Katsuki is in the turning red stage due to asphyxiation stage. He tries everything, tries to cough, to heave, to roll his eyes or blink, but nothing works and there are fuzzy spots in his vision and he thinks of the sludge villain and the drowning and general death. He is going to die with people two feet away discussing some fake Nomu process bullshit. “—Soon he’ll get his new quirks and we’ll wipe his memory clean.”

“Hmm,” says Shigaraki again, approaching the bed and flexing the limp locked-up joints of Katsuki’s sleeved arms as if playing with a doll. Katsuki wants nothing more than to blast him away and preferably into the grave, take him and the doctor and make them splats on the pavement and get his fucking oxygen back and not die in this most pathetic way possible. “He’s turning a bit red,”

“Ah, yes, he’s not ready for prolonged use without a mask,” explains the doctor, shoving Katsuki’s mask back on.

He tunes out their conversation to relish in the blessed breathable air. His eyeballs can’t move from where they’re pointed straight ahead, and they’re a bit dry from inability to blink, but the two villains do fall in the furthest corner of his vision, Handsy buying every bit of the doctor’s drivel. Not for the first time, Katsuki feels like he’s dealing with an overgrown kid who’s been pushed around his whole life. A little brother who’s been given the kiddie controller with no batteries inside and told to go ham while his superiors are playing the actual game. He wonders where All For One found him. If that weirdo managed to elope or if he stole some poor sob off the streets.

Katsuki asks the doctor during their next, less straining test, one of those where he needs to dip his hands in beakers of shit, acids, strong bases, you name it or get himself shocked. The doctor is mouthy, all the villains are. They’re so confident that Katsuki will never be able to escape that they feel validated and secure in ranting to him. He already knows way more about All For One and One For All and Deku’s new quirk and Nomu-making than he has any right or care to.

“Tomura?” the doctor says, stopping his tasing. Katsuki holds back his relieved sigh. The main reason he gets the doctor to blabber is that, now that he knows how to pretend he’s listening, it distracts the guy and offers at least a few seconds of pause from his more painful bullshit. “All for One needs a successor like your friend Izuku too, he’s been grooming that one for years. He insists on having the child parade the hands of the family he killed around, it’s so unhygienic.”

Katsuki's stomach churns. They force the guy to wear his dead family's hands?! And the guy thinks they're better than the heroes? He files that fact away (because what are you supposed to do with that information) and changes the topic: "Why make it seem like you treat me nice in here? Fucker can't handle gore?"

"We've never had a Nomu made from someone alive. Can't have him believing Sensei tortures kids."

Katsuki hisses. "You said all the high-end Nomu candidates get put through this shit."

"Of course." The doctor smirks. "Their corpses do."

"And the other fucks who come around here don't tell Hands what's going on? Seems like crap to me."

The doctor tuts, shifting the ugly-ass glasses on his face. "Oh Dabi would never. He owes me and All For One some favors." Whatever that means. "Regardless, I serve All For One and only All For One until the successor is ready."

You don't have faith in Handsy for shit you mean.

He curses as the tasing starts up again. "Aren't you a smart one? Trying to distract me Katsuki?"

"Motherfucker," he slurs but dips his pinky in the hydrochloric acid anyway because the burn on his calloused and resistant hands hurts much less than a shock to the whole body.

Time melts away and the drugs get stronger. It feels like each passage between sessions grows stifling, like the doctor shows up just when Katsuki is on the brink of losing it for good. Katsuki starts rationing his water. He searches for ways to entertain himself inside the unchanging cell. Each time he's left alone he feels himself lose his cognitive abilities. Once it gets so bad he can't even read or count properly.

With nothing to stimulate himself with, his mind starts making shit up. Katsuki starts seeing shapes everywhere, his own reflection morphs into a monster made of dozens of protrusions. Deku shows up in his cell, sits by the front, out of reach, counting his sins. It could almost be comical if he were right enough to realize it's a hallucination.

He's got nothing to do so he always ends up thinking about the life he used to live, about who he used to be, and Deku… Deku who, beneath all that anger and faux-superiority, Katsuki has always been shit scared of, in multiple ways.

Deku is terrifying because he's more resilient than a fucking tardigrade, he could break his bones until they're confetti and still gets up, lose a couple of limbs and find some bogus way to make new ones, fuck, he could die and find a way to drag himself from the fucking afterlife if it came down to it. Katsuki had been more shocked that Deku had spawned a quirk from the ether than by him making it into UA seemingly quirkless. When he'd first heard, he'd thought, of course, that insane motherfucker did it somehow.

Deku's problem is that he's the opposite of normal and rational and it's like his every action takes Katsuki's sanity and carefully planned natural order and dumps it from a fifty-story window straight onto the tracks of shinkansen going three hundred kilometers an hour. You know those kiddie games, where you have a shape and you put it in the respective hole? When Deku plays that game, he breaks it.

You looked like you needed saving , he'd told Katsuki that day he damn near committed suicide. While all those extras looked on like Katsuki dying was free entertainment, he'd thrown himself into the fray to rescue someone he should hate. And after that, presumably, All Might had picked him.

And look, Katsuki's aware, ok, that he's not exactly a ten out of ten in niceness points. But Deku isn't even a ten, Deku's a ten million. He's so kind it backfires and becomes dangerous, for everyone. Dangerous because he's a walking death bomb and his mentality spreads, like some kind of brain cell demolishing plague. Do people not see it?

IcyHot's deranged smile as he used his fire against Deku, Round Face using a suicide plan in the Sports Festival (people were calling Katsuki the bad guy when Round Face's plan had been dropping debris the size of cars to fucking flatten him! She'd been lucky it had been Katsuki she'd been against in that fight and he could obliterate the debris with ease, otherwise, both of them would be very dead.) Katsuki has even heard rumors that Glasses, straight-laced Robocop 'your lack of tie is disrupting the order of the classroom' Glasses had tried to *murder* Stain.

It's a pattern, spending time with Deku will make you lose your mind because that bastard has never had a sliver of self-preservation or care

and he makes it look like a good thing. Katsuki remembers all the times he had to stop kid Deku from sprinting into traffic to save ants and worms and cats and various other animals that were probably stronger than him when he'd been a deku.

That wasn't fucking normal and Katsuki had recognized it within a few months of meeting Deku for the first time. It pissed him off. Deku was his constant and he'd hurt himself irreparably by being a reckless fuck and he'd end up fucking dying if he became a hero with noodles for limbs.

Katsuki had been scared of being left behind in every sense of the word, so he'd spun some bullshit narrative that Deku was the one looking down on him, Deku was the one who wouldn't go the fuck away and forced his hand. It was Deku ruining their friendship. If only he didn't follow Katsuki around, if only he didn't act so damn high and mighty, wasn't so fucking delusional.

"Look in the mirror, Kacchan," the Deku in his mind would say, and Katsuki would think about how he'd stuck himself in his very own self-fulfilling prophecy.

He'd been the one who pushed Deku away. Who'd hurt Deku. Who'd ruined that innocent childhood thing they had and made everyone around him see a monster instead of a person. He'd pushed Deku so much, fucked up so bad, that Deku, the most righteous and selfless of bastards, had given up on him.

Stupid motherfucker. There's no one that makes Katsuki see red and burn with the urge to destroy quite like him.

So yeah, staying awake makes him want to tear his hair out, yet his sleep is plagued with nightmares, always set in the four walls of this stupid cell, that make him gasp awake, shaking, and definitely not crying.

He's stopped eating, and the muscles that he used to be so proud of are no more than faint indentations beneath scarred and scabbed skin.

His only source of human interaction is the doctor, whose image twists from the effect of drugs and Katsuki's own breaking mind. Sometimes, when the older man is jotting down observations and admiring his quirk, he reminds Katsuki of a crooked version of Deku, and Katsuki wonders if this is his karma.

“How long has it been?“ he asks in the next session when the Doctor is taking skin samples or some shit. He doesn’t even care about what tests they do anymore, hell, he’s started to look forward to them because of the water he’s given after.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” says the Doctor as he runs the scalpel across the raw skin of his forehand.

“Obviously,” Katsuki insists. Shutting up won’t stop this guy from hurting him. He might as well be as annoying as possible.

The doctor pretends to think. “Two years.”

Katsuki gasps. “Fucking liar.”

“Maybe two years, maybe two months, maybe a day, I don’t know. However long doesn’t matter anyway, you’re not getting out of here Katsuki, at least not as you are now.” Katsuki *knows*. This little bitch makes sure to remind him every time he opens his big mouth. He flinches subconsciously as gloved hands rub disinfectant over his skin.

“Are you hoping the heroes will come to save you? There’s not been a single missing notice you know, no one cares.” He places a sample of skin into a Petri dish (it looks about as disgusting as it sounds) and screws on the top. “Why would they? They’ve never cared. Why would they spend precious resources on a future villain? You just settle down and enjoy the ride. You’ll be more powerful than you’d ever thought possible by the end of this.”

“Nah, I’m hoping you’ll shut the fuck up and I’ll get the chance to feed you your entrails and stick your own fist down your throat.” That scalpel does not need to slice that deep for a fucking skin sample, well, someone is mad.

“You’re sounding more and more like a proper villain,”

Katsuki glares in pure malice. This dude is like a broken record. This is what, the fifty-third time he’s said this? It’s lost its charm after the first ten. Yada yada, he’s a bad person, he can’t be a hero, heroes need to wax sweet poetry every time they open their mouths, pose holding rescued children with glittering eyes, cry rainbows and piss rose water or whatever. Fuck that.

Katsuki’s hands explode. He’s been told on sixteen separate occasions his victory grin ranges from discomforting to terrifying enough to make people shit themselves. He’d never planned to be the type of

hero who pats you on the back for doing nothing and feeds you sugar cubes.

And he's not about to bend over for the likes of Mustache Twirly Pussy over here, nor will he ever stoop as low as to become a villain. Yeah, he's bad, he's the worst, and so what? "This is the way I've always talked you potato-headed fuckstick. You're a grade-A authority on proper villainy, eh? Trained up your emo boy band good? Practice your speeches in front of the mirror every—ow motherfuck—"

The doctor looks satisfied at the scalpel now embedded in Katsuki's forearm. That is not a 'medical incision' that's a fucking stab. Katsuki flexes his arm where it's strapped to the medical table and a grin spreads on his own face when the scalped falls out and nicks the Doctor's hand. He doesn't even register the pain.

"Wish I could take that and shove it up your ass."

He gets stabbed a bunch more for that one, by the end of the session he's lightheaded and never strapped off the table and he doesn't get water either, he definitely pushed it this time.

It sucks, every part of this does. But Katsuki's strong. He's not a fucking weakling. He's not allowed to be a fucking weakling. Any game Katsuki doesn't win he destroys. He's already spent far too long trying to live up to expectations when he's specialized in defying them, no way will he play right into people's hands again. Others don't break Katsuki, Katsuki breaks them, and he won't stop fighting until that's indisputable.

Except he's not always strong. Nowhere near the strongest. And it hurts, it hurts a lot sometimes, the words and the experiments and the prolonged solitude. The thought that he'll never get out. That he'll end up a villain whether he likes it or not.

But Katsuki is good at everything, including pretending. He's the best at pretending. Heroes are supposed to be. And if he pretends that he's fine and strong and unbeatable and a hero long enough, it'll become the truth.

Everyone but you sees it.

He's no hero at all.

When the door shifts open on a day Katsuki can't name, he's too high and his body doesn't even think to tense with the promise of pain or the excitement of human interaction. He sits fidgeting in his corner, staring at the holes in the ceiling for gas dispensing that look like stars.

A foot nudges his knee, and he turns his head to see Dabi, colors all wrong and amplified. The guy hadn't shown up again after that first fire test, even though Katsuki had done more fire resistance tests after. He tries to extend his neck to search for the doctor,

"He isn't here," says Dabi, "came while he's busy."

"Why?" Katsuki slurs, voice close to a whine. "No firebox torture today, Crusty?"

"Wanted to piss him off," upon inspecting him further, Dabi looks a little taken aback. "Kid, are you high?"

"M'always high," he replies, counting the little blobs that seem to jump from Dabi's skin. "Look, we match!" He lifts his left arm, the one that's usually put through all the fire tests, and compares it to Dabi's grafted skin. His is a darker red in color, but Katsuki's arm isn't far behind. He's proud. He'll have the best-burnt arm in the world. He'll be number one.

"…Okay." Dabi reaches into the pockets of his gaudy coat and produces a plastic bag. He rips it open and out comes a round something. Scents Katsuki hasn't smelled in how long has it been? assault his nose and his stomach jumps in simultaneous hunger and nausea. "I thought you'd get bored of that gruel."

Katsuki nabs the bun from him with the ferocity of someone who's been starved and tears into it. It's spicy and warm and tastes not like nothing, so he takes bite after bite despite the roiling in his gut. "Di'ya' feel bad 'bout fryin' me?" Katsuki asks because he's not sure why Dabi's doing this. It's either he's being kind out of rare goodwill or the bun is poisoned and this is a new advanced torture method. Katsuki does not care if it is.

Dabi doesn't reply, whatever he was going to say cut off by the boring beep of his phone. "Yes, I'll be there in time Twice," he says, leaking exasperation, "*Yes* the plan is fine. This is the fifth time you've called. You—Shut up dumbass, phone calls can be tapped."

“Wher’ you goin’ Malfunctioned Flamethrower? Don’t leave me!” Katsuki drags the last syllable out. He’s counted all the holes in the ceiling five times over already (and gotten a different number each time). There’s nothing to *do* .

Dabi seems to measure him up, mutters something like ‘He’s high anyway’, and then: “We’re kidnapping a UA student to recruit at their summer camp.”

Ah, the summer camp. Once upon a time that was all he’d had to worry about. If that’s happening now, Katsuki also has a time frame for how long it’s been for the first time ever, but his brain is too addled to consider it. “Who?” he questions instead.

Dabi pauses again before relenting, “Todoroki Shouto.”

Which was that, the one spit down the middle? Yeah, that bastard. A hic escapes from Katsuki’s throat. “Why d'you say his name like tha’?”

“Like what?”

“Like he pissed on your dead dog’s grave after runnin’ him over.”

Crusty’s face sours. “Taking him like this is a waste of time.”

Katsuki considers that. “You don’ think he can be a villain- or you don' want him to be.”

“Shouto also becoming a villain would ruin my plan.”

“Shouto? Also? Wha’ you his long lost brother or som’thin?“ Their eyes *are* a similar shade, and they both have fire-based quirks. He remembers from IcyHot and Deku’s conversation in the Festival stadium corridor that Endeavor had multiple kids in an effort to get one with a perfect combo quirk. He laughs. ”Crusty and Half n’ Half fighting over daddy’s attention, that’s a funny.“

Dabi is gaping like a deer in headlights and Katsuki knows that by some lucky chance, he’s hit the nail right on the head. “Shit, for real?” He laughs again, “Stop lookin’ like that, Todoroki Crusty—”

All of Dabi’s goodwill from earlier has disappeared from his face, and before he knows it, Katsuki is sitting through Todoroki tragic backstory version two, serving only to further affirm that Endeavor a pile of trash. It seems oversharing is a common trait of the family. “What did IcyHot do though? You mad at ‘im for bein’ born?” Katsuki

asks once Staples is done with his story.

“Shouto is an unfortunate obstacle. The death of his masterpiece is bound to tear Endeavor apart.”

“Yeah right.” Katsuki scoffs. “You’re jealous o’ him. He got more head pats from Endywhore than you.” There’s that look on Dabi’s face again. “You couldn’t get Endeavor’s nice attention so ya want his negative one now—”

The villain does not seem to like that, considering he kicks Katsuki to the gut. “I don’t know what you know of Endeavor, but you’re *like* him. Hiding behind the status of a hero while you abuse and destroy in private.”

“Well, first of all, fuck you, you bitch, wanna fight?” He musters all his strength to kick Dabi right back, and the villain backs away, scowling at him.

“I know you’re high, brat, but you can’t expect me to take that seriously.”

And yeah, alright, Katsuki knows he doesn’t look the best, chained to a wall and having lived on nothing for however long it’s been but— “Double fuck you, overcooked asshole, I bet I could make ya die fifty times over you’re that weak. I’d string ya up by your own staples little fuck.” Katsuki eyes them critically. “How do they even work? Are they for aesthetics? To match your band-reject concept? Shit, where was I? Right.” He giggles, the only redeeming quality of the shameful sound being Crusty’s alarmed face. “Second of all, ya kidnap and help torture civilians. We’re all goin’ to the same dumpster.”

“I don’t care where I end up, as long as that man pays for it with his blood.”

Katsuki rubs his aching stomach, thinking hard. He does not lose in a fight of logic. “That’s rough buddy I mean it, but why don’t ya get a job or somethin’ and get rich and run the world and leave Endywhore moneyless n in jail n live your own life. Land yourself a good shady lawyer n you’re gonna get off easy. No need to be... arson happy.”

“Privileged kids like you wouldn’t understand. These are all Endeavor’s sins manifesting in my actions, they’re his flames burning everyone I’ve killed. In the end, it all boils down to him. The legal system rewards people like him. I’ll make him pay myself, and we’ll dance in hell together.” He looked okay before, now he's borderline

unhinged. Huh, well.

“Dance in hell together? What dance do ya’ like, I can do ballet ya know? Never mind.” Katsuki laughs again. Crusty is fun. “N’ whoa, there Shakespeare. That’s a lot o’ nonsense. Fine, fuck the legal system then, since you’re mad a’ Endeavor go bash his head in or somethin’ sure. But why’re ya involvin’ mobs in your business? What did the extras in my old class do to ya? Shi-it.” Katsuki imagines Deku murdering random people for what Katsuki did to him and the thought is a hilariously illogical one.

He wants to say more but his stomach lurches and he’s puking that bun he ate right back onto the floor. Of course, it wouldn’t sit, Katsuki has been starving for too long, he ate too fast, and he got kicked straight in the stomach. He coughs on bile. The colorful vomit blurs his reflection on the metal, and a sudden need to hurt so he can stay conscious overcomes him, gloved hand snaking into blond hair to tug, hard.

Dabi has snapped out of his stupor. His phone rings again and he takes it as a cue to leave, locking the door on his way out and leaving Katsuki alone with his demons.

Katsuki knew shit was going to go down when the doctor left mid-session, not bothering to refit the suppressant gloves and doing a rushed job of cuffing his arm to the wall. No matter how much Katsuki tried to piss him off and be difficult, he never left mid-session before. He’s also sober and (force) fed for the first time in forever.

Faced with none other than Sensei, All For One himself, this is indeed about the biggest shit that could’ve gone down, ever.

Even if Katsuki wasn’t tied down he’s sure the big boss’s very presence would be enough to freeze him in place. He’s become familiar with fear and all its cousins throughout this hellish month, yet looking at this guy, dark suit pressed to perfection, face obscured by a black helmet-like mask with a dozen tubes protruding in neat rows, stance the definition of ease, this is the closest he’s come to pissing himself from terror.

“I’ve been told a lot of things about you, Katsuki,” he says, voice a touch metallic through the filters of the mask. “I must say that I’m impressed that you’ve survived this long. Ujiko can be a little over-enthusiastic with subjects he takes a liking to.”

A little? Katsuki already hates this guy. It's like if Principal Nezu and that class-B copycat had an obnoxious, smug, overpowered lovechild. "Fuck you," he says.

"Yes, you're perfect for this. I'll have to rush the process but… we've dawdled a bit too long already."

He proceeds to do nothing but stay still. It gives Katsuki enough time to commit every detail of his cliché but effective appearance to memory, fixate on every line, and burn it into the mental list of people he wants to both destroy and keep at a minimum a thousand-kilometer distance, right up there with the doctor (Daruma? Ujiko? What the fuck is the bastard's name?). The tension in the room is palpable, and Katsuki stiffens each time it looks like All For One shifts.

"Are you killing me or not? Get on with it? I'm going to die of old age at this rate." He's feeling mouthier than usual, and dare he say, a little excited at the prospect of freedom, even if it comes through death. Weeks of battling for your grip on sanity will do that to you.

All For One laughs, an ugly smooth rumble. "Kill you? That would be a waste." Finally, he moves to approach Katsuki with wide strides and stops half a meter shy of the corner he's slumped against. A too large too cold hand comes up to lay on top of his head. "You'll do well to sit still." He feels the threat more than he hears the words

"When you've lived as long as I have, you start getting bored. I like making stories you see, I like drama and irony, and my quirk is the perfect facilitator of my little hobby. It's as easy as a touch to rip two best friends apart by taking one's quirk and giving it to the other, it's amusing to watch the quirkless view my gifts as gifts of god, completely unaware their new power is incompatible with their body and could spin out of control and kill everyone around them at any moment. A little push and any heartbroken and years abused child will tip over into the dark side—"

"You're insane—"

"That may be so, by society's standards. But I exist because nature made me as I am, which means I have a place in this world. If I have a story I want to watch, who's to stop me from making it happen? Certainly not man-made morals." A shake of his head. "I digress. Katsuki, you're here because you'd make a great story, and all of this is the set-up for the opening act."

"Wouldn't it be fun if the one society cast away as villainous returned

to the scene to get revenge on the one who put him in that public position in the first place— the one who refused to take him seriously then stood by as he was treated worse than a wild animal for winning?" Katsuki can't even see his expression yet it feels like All For One is grinning. "Wouldn't it be fun if I had you kill Todoroki Shouto right in front of his father, your mentor, and a handful of your old classmates? A fitting starting line for a villain born of expectation, wouldn't you say? Don't you want them to regret ever pushing you to the path of villainy?"

No, no, no. That's the exact opposite of what he wants. That would be proving everyone right. No matter how he's acted in the past, Katsuki has always been honest with his wants, and villainy has never been on the list. He'd been earnest in his efforts to be number one, to win like All Might who he hasn't thought of in so long. Katsuki may never get the chance to be a hero again, but he doesn't want to kill IcyHot. He doesn't want to kill anyone. Or play any part in this bastard's sick fantasies. He snarls and makes to start cursing, but All For One's palm has shifted to cover his face, making any sound come out muffled.

"And don't worry, I might have you fight All Might's little successor too, I know you have quite the history."

Katsuki struggles against the iron grip as he feels a pulling sensation spread from the center of his chest. No fucking way is he about to go back to being that middle school loser who terrorized Deku in amplified form, no way is he about to doom himself to becoming a footnote in the great Deku's biography, or worse, the one credited with putting him six feet under. He'll die before he accepts that fate.

So whatever All For One is trying to do, he tugs back against it with the force of every atom in his body. He feels something give and for a moment it's like he's untethered from reality, floating in empty space. Then All For One's hand leaves his face and he falls backward, air escaping his lungs in a whoosh and eyes rolling, body aching like he's been run over by a giant locomotive.

All For One hooks a finger under his chin and makes him look up. Katsuki's blood rushes into ice. The villain is surrounded by a cloud of matter that was definitely not there before. It's like an aura built of hundreds of substances; ones that glitter pastel and ones that contort into impossible cubes and ones that stretch into twisting goopy shapes. The substances themselves are of various colors but amalgamated together, they appear a dull grey-green, encased by a thin layer of glowing, transparent white film. A wisp of the matter

floats near Katsuki's feet and he flinches away.

"It didn't…?" All For One mutters before Katsuki feels a tearing stab of pain near his stomach, so horrible he needs to double over, and he looks down to see a dark spike shot through with strands of white extending from the villain's finger into his gut. The spike's white veins pulse, and the skin on Katsuki's palms tingles the way it does when he ignites an explosion. But nothing happens. No blast. His quirk isn't working. What the fuck?!

The spike is ripped from his gut as fast as it was put in there, and faintly glowing red-orange blood begins bubbling and gushing from the hole it left in an instant. "You're a dud," says All For One, the once level tone of his voice somewhat shrill from shock. Suddenly the room shakes, and he looks upward as if he can sense what's going on above ground. He eyes the blood spilling from Katsuki's wound in large bursts. "There's no more time…" he mutters again, then promptly turns heel and walks out of the room, slimy aura moving with him as if it's alive, bending to the shapes of the cell and squishing to fit through the door as he disappears.

Chapter End Notes

> What do you think? It's kind of a mess but I like it lmaoo. Originally I wanted to cut it after the Dabi meeting and save the AFO one for next chapter, but I decided to be mean and leave you guys with a cliffhanger TT.
>
> Let me know your theories on what's going on here because the weird shit I have planned is starting to kick in and I'm curious what you think of it.

Chapter 4: The disappearance of Bakugou Katsuki

Chapter Summary

Keeping up with Midoriya Izuku

Chapter Notes

Probably not what everyone was expecting but I'm mean so. I'm not too sure about this one but then again I'm never sure about anything so fuck it.

Triggers for this are mentioned bullying in very little detail.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku regrets it.

He regrets it the moment it slips out. He'd been mad, he didn't want to hear Aizawa-sensei's critique or see All Might's disappointed face. He couldn't afford to fall behind. He's supposed to be All Might's successor. He *needs* to live up to All Might's legacy. And when Aizawa-sensei had called the exam a test of their cooperation, he'd snapped.

Because Izuku had been willing to cooperate from the moment they entered the exam field, he'd been ready to hear Kacchan out, while Kacchan… Kacchan hadn't even tried. He'd downright punched Izuku to get him to shut up, something he hadn't done in years, and even said he'd rather lose, Kacchan of all people. And even if they worked out a wonky something in the end, it had been useless, considering they'd wasted so much time the timer had simply run out on them.

And in that disappointment high, all Izuku could think about was how had Kacchan not fought with him tooth and nail over doing even the smallest bit of teamwork they wouldn't have failed. All he could think about was how the exam was unfair in the first place since it was only Kacchan who hated Izuku and Izuku hated that Kacchan hated him.

So he snapped and told Aizawa-sensei everything.

Now, heat of the moment frustration gone and sitting in the infirmary bed under Recovery Girl's careful scrutiny while Aizawa-sensei and Kacchan and Principal Nezu 'discuss' in the next room, he's really

regretting it.

All Might had near snapped Izuku's vertebrae, and he can't move well until he gains a bit more stamina and Recovery Girl can use her quirk on him again. It takes far too long for Aizawa-sensei to push the infirmary door open, looking more exhausted than Izuku has ever seen him. He sits on the bed near Izuku's with a world-weary sigh and eyes Izuku critically.

"We thought it best to expel Bakugou."

It's funny how a single sentence can make Izuku's heart plummet to his toes. He'd known Kacchan was going to face consequences for perhaps the first time ever, but straight up expulsion?

"Why— why would you do that?!" Izuku near yells, incredulous.

Aizawa sensei looks a mix of angry and tired and exasperated and Izuku can't tell which one is supposed to be at the forefront, "Midoriya… you don't have to accept people treating you that way… and he can't expect to treat other people that way with no repercussions. He hit you today, unprovoked. As early as the first day of school he tried to attack you in front of me. If anything, I should be apologizing to you for not looking into your relationship and taking action sooner."

Izuku is stunned, and a warm feeling spreads throughout his chest. He's— he's never had an adult stand up for him.

"You're allowed to be angry and upset at what happened Midoriya, you don't have to protect Bakugou. He's more than capable of taking up responsibility," finishes sensei and Izuku's brief moment of comfort is snapped by the reminder of just what they're talking about.

And he does know that. He gets angry at Kacchan plenty inside his head. But there's a side of him that wants to be friends with Kacchan, wants to be closer to him, despite everything. Wants that thing they had as kids back. And now…

"Why would you expel him though?! Being a hero is—" It's Kacchan's dream. It's the reason he's been breathing since he found out what heroes were. Kacchan is made to be a hero and Izuku— Izuku might've just become the reason he might never even get the chance.

"Bakugou has shown himself seriously misguided about what a hero is supposed to be," says Aizawa-sensei unperturbed. "A drastic measure

like this will do both of you good and knock some sense into him. He's talented and determined and strong. He'll bounce back and be a better person by the end of it."

He's strong.

That's what everyone is always saying. That's what everyone is always saying, yet why can't Izuku quite believe it?

He thinks back to Kacchan's terrified face on the day of the sludge villain, his desperation at having to work with Izuku mere hours prior (why? he'd seemed destroyed *did he hate Izuku that much*) his tear-stained eyes after their first heroics exercise. Kacchan is…

"Trust me on this. Nothing that happened today is on you Midoriya, though I'm sure me telling you that won't convince you in the slightest. You'll be attending mandatory counseling sessions with Hound Dog, and I won't accept protests on this. The school has done a poor job of paying attention to your mental health, and we'll be discussing this with your mother as well."

Izuku nods along, on autopilot, but he feels so far gone, can't process that Kacchan's stay at UA is done, that it had ended just like that, that he'd never get to live his dream, because of Izuku and his big mouth. He'd known what he was doing when he told sensei, but some part of him had thought back to their middle school days, to how their teachers never cared, and crossed expulsion off the table. Goosebumps break out onto his arms, exposed due to his tattered hero costume. "You shouldn't have expelled him," he says to Aizawa-sensei in a daze, and the man clicks his jaw. "He was improving… he needs help too. What about— What about Kacchan's mental health?" He can feel the tears pooling in the corners of his eyes. He wipes them with a finger.

"You're too kind for your own good problem child. I've expelled kids for far less. Bakugou will be fine."

It sounds like a lie.

He spends the next day trying his best not to think about the Kacchan situation while being reminded of the Kacchan situation at every turn. Rumors of the expulsion had exploded all over the school overnight, and they still had the final few days of the first term left, so Kacchan's absence in the classroom was as clear as day. His friends tried not to pry but Izuku could tell they really wanted to, and when he heard a girl from general studies say she'd been told Kacchan had downright

tried to murder Izuku during their exam while walking to the gym, he realized the rumor mill would not pause until they'd bled this drama dry.

He ended up letting it slip again, in some misguided attempt to salvage Kacchan's reputation (not that the truth is all that flattering). His classmates were sympathetic, most impressed yet at the same time unsettled by their first real display of sensei's rumored harshness, by the confirmation that UA was no joke and that even someone with as much potential and skill as Kacchan didn't have his spot guaranteed. A few muttered outright that they'd always known Kacchan was trouble. Izuku couldn't even enjoy having support when Kacchan getting expelled was the last thing he'd wanted to happen. In fact, he'd grown so incensed by the whispers he'd snapped at the class to keep their thoughts to themselves. No one spoke to him about Kacchan for the remaining three days of the term.

The day after that, he woke up to all his hero news sites buzzing with the latest scoop: "Expulsion of villainous student Bakugou Katsuki for bullying classmate." Someone had leaked the story, and dozens of others had stepped up to offer their two cents and paint Kacchan into a monster. People who'd bullied Izuku in middle school right alongside Kacchan were posting their tear-stained anecdotes of Kacchan's cruelty.

The things they were saying about him… even his mother, who'd held a bit of a grudge against Kacchan since Auntie Mitsuki grew detached and Kacchan's relationship with Izuku soured, had frowned and changed to another channel.

Within the week it snowballed into a scandal, cases of bullying coming to light country-wide, heroes and hero students placed under harsh media scrutiny. Some people might've taken satisfaction in watching their tormentor get torn apart, but Izuku had been ill with guilt for days. Every other thread in the hero forum mentioned Kacchan in one way or another, and they were never nice statements. Izuku couldn't even do anything, the media had created their narrative and any new information would only be twisted to fit it.

Kacchan might've been able to bounce back from a UA expulsion, but a media scandal of this size?

Izuku hadn't been able to take it, three days into their summer break he'd shown up in front of Kacchan's house, intent on talking to him and apologizing. Auntie Mitsuki and Uncle Masaru's car wasn't in the

driveway. He must've been alone at home. Izuku had knocked on the door, rung the doorbell even yelled "Kacchan" once or twice, but he'd gotten no reply. The same happened when he came back the next day.

Kacchan didn't want to see him, and Izuku felt stupid for ever considering otherwise. Kacchan hated him, and surely any attempt at peace on Izuku's end right now would be viewed as patronizing.

You're too selfless for your own good, problem child.

Maybe that was true.

The idea of counseling with Hound Dog-sensei was terrifying. Now, Izuku has never been the type to be scared of people solely from the appearance of their quirks (even if Hound Dog-Sensei goes out of his way to look as threatening as possible). No, it's not Hound Dog himself that worried Izuku most, but rather the entire concept of therapy. He's not sure what type of help he's supposed to need, or what he's supposed to change. He's always thought of himself as fine. Needing therapy at all is a foreign concept to him. But it had been part of the terms for being allowed to pass the practical without actually having passed it, so here Izuku was.

Even if he seems like the type of person who wears his heart on his sleeve, who is open with others and easy to confide in, he gets embarrassed and self-conscious fast, and there's nothing more embarrassing than speaking about his own feelings. Feelings are sticky, complicated things, and though he hates seeing others wallowing in them, he's happy to do so himself. Maybe he's a bit of a hypocrite.

The first session was no more than twenty minutes, Hound Dog-sensei did a basic introduction (Izuku was not about to tell him he has three pages filled to the brim with his information and analysis of his quirk in notebook number twelve) and asked Izuku to do the same. The second one was harder, Hound Dog started asking all these personal questions. As he prepared to answer, Izuku recalled his mother's elated face when he told her UA would be offering this kind of help, her tearful admission that she felt she'd failed Izuku growing up and was happy to see him getting the support he deserved. He fidgeted with his fingers under the table, scared that he'd be dismissed, or Hound Dog would find him weird. It was hard to get the first word out, but after that, it's like the floodgates had opened and the talk continued smoothly.

Hound Dog gave him two forms to complete at home and mail back. When he'd returned for his last session of the term with his mother in toe, Hound Dog recommended them a therapist who specialized in heroes-in-training, who would help Izuku not only with starting to dispel the bad remnants of those ten years he spent quirkless but also with any struggles he might have in his journey as a hero. "Having people to confide in is very important for a hero," he'd said. "And it's even better if the person knows how to help you handle your problems. Heroes are human too, as easy as it is to forget that. And humans all have struggles. I've been lobbying for a greater focus on mental healing alongside physical healing for years." That last part was lamented in low annoyed tones.

They thanked him and walked home together. His mom made him katsudon. As he picked at the rice, he thought about the business card in his pocket. His first proper therapy session was scheduled for Monday, three days from then, and he'd been already feeling the nerves.

They'd been unfounded, in the end. His therapist was a quirkless woman in her late thirties named Iyashi Kyou, and the two of them connected the moment Izuku laid eyes on the hero figures adorning her office. "Kind people have it hard, when they see someone in trouble, they beat themselves up over it. They physically can't ignore the need to help. They can't live with themselves. For them, being selfless is, in a way, a selfish endeavor. Do you think that's true?" she'd told him in their second session when they'd started to discuss Izuku's compulsive need to defend the well-being of others. Izuku had never thought about it that way.

Therapy was okay. It was nice. He'd discovered problems with himself he'd never even known he'd had, and had started planning a way to confess the constant pressure he felt without spilling All Might's secret. Even when they talked about middle school, and elementary school, and growing up quirkless, Izuku never talked about Kacchan, at least not by name. He was always *this person*, or *that person.* Izuku wasn't ready to talk about Kacchan.

Two weeks or so into summer break All Might offered Izuku a trip to I-Expo, held at I-Island. His mentor could see that Izuku had been faring badly since exam day, and he wore his guilt like a chain around his neck. He must've thought a change of environment could do Izuku good. Izuku went, there was no way he'd miss a chance to see I-Expo with this own eyes.

He saw a bunch of his classmates there and the exhibition got attacked because villains just cannot leave them alone this year. Still, he'd met Melissa and Shield-san and tested some amazing new gauntlet materials that could one day come in handy, plus he hadn't thought about Kacchan for a whole week. All in all, it had been a success.

When Izuku came back home he threw himself into training and self-care. The whole reason Kacchan had been expelled was out of Aizawa-sensei's care for him, and Izuku didn't want Aizawa-sensei to regret their decision. He didn't go to see Kacchan again, convinced he'd be met with a shut door to the face. Kacchan was strong. Izuku had never met a person who wanted to be a hero more. The media had already moved on to their next punching bag. He'd take this as a minor challenge and overcome it. He'd be fine.

And even if he wasn't, Kacchan himself had made it abundantly clear Izuku had no business meddling in his problems. He was always pushing Izuku away, calling him annoying and a stalker and overbearing. It was time Izuku did what the other boy wanted and stayed away, despite the nagging feeling insisting this was a very bad decision.

It's the second to last day of July when Izuku gets a text. He's in his room, doing some pre-preparation for the second term, going over a few chemistry chapters that keep giving him trouble. The buzz of a table-top fan and the creak of the grip strengthener he's squeezing with his left hand are the only sounds in the room, and the hot air coming inside through the open window makes his Gen Two All Might curtain poof.

Izuku doesn't usually check his phone when he's studying, but he hasn't been able to figure out how to balance this equation for over twenty minutes now, so he graces himself with a break.

The text is from an unknown sender, but a quirk scan over the Line account reveals it to be Kirishima. Izuku should really register the numbers of all his classmates one of these days. He opens the app after creating a new contact for Kirishima.

[Kirishima from UA] 18:45

hey man

[You] 16:46

Hi!.

Izuku cringes at the simplistic reply. He'd only started texting people this year, since he'd never had anyone to text but his mom before, and he bets it shows. Uraraka has a talent for making conversations flow, Iida doesn't text, and Todoroki is about as awkward as Izuku, so at least he's never made to feel bad about it.

Kirishima is bright and overall pleasant to be around, the type of person who labels you his friend right away if you're half-decent, but even if Izuku interacts with him just fine in class, they've never texted outside of it before, so he's nervous.

[Kirishima from UA] 18:46

enjoying the break?

[You] 16:46

Yup!

He goes to type a little summary of what he's been doing before remembering that Kirishima did not ask and will not care, so he sticks for simpler option.

[You] 18:46

It's nice to have some time off.

[Kirishima from UA] 18:47

i feel that

It takes a bit for Kirishima to send another text, and Izuku doesn't know what to send back. He doubts Kirishima texted him just to do small talk. He opts to wait as the ***typing*** below Kirishima's name blares on and off and then a flurry of messages arrives.

[Kirishima from UA] 18:50

im sorry if this is weird.

[Kirishima from UA] 18:50

and if you don't want to talk about it I'd be fine with that

[Kirishima from UA] 18:50

id totally get it

[Kirishima from UA] 18:51

But I was wondering

[Kirishima from UA] 18:51

If I could give me Bakugous address

Kacchan's name makes an uncomfortable pit grow in Izuku's stomach. Kirishima is Kacchan's friend. Kacchan's actual friend, as in the Kacchan likes him type of friend. They paired up together a lot in sparring exercises and studied together for finals. Kirishima is Kacchan's first genuine friend in years, and through the redhead, Kacchan had started to grow more connected to the rest of the class. Kacchan lets his defenses down around Kirishima Kirishima had done in less than three months what Izuku has been trying to repair for a decade what does he have that Izuku doesn't?

Despite that, Kirishima had been incredibly understanding of Izuku's problem and offered him support the moment he'd confessed what brought on the expulsion to the class. Made sure Izuku knew that when it came to that particular issue, he was on Izuku's side, regardless of the conflicted look on his face.

[Kirishima from UA] 18:51

only if u don't mind ofc

[Kirishima from UA] 18:52

id never want to make you uncomfortable

[You] 18:52

No no, it's fine!

[You] 18:52

Two seconds.

As Izuku types a rough address into the text box, he can't help but frown. Kirishima is Kacchan's friend, so why is he asking Izuku, Kacchan's number one enemy, about this instead of asking Kacchan directly? Against better judgment, Izuku backspaces on the address text and writes a new one.

[You] 18:53

How come you don't have it and what do you need it for?

Er, that sounds a little too much like an interrogation, but Izuku's pressed send before he can think twice.

[Kirishima from UA] 18:53

he never talked about his home life much

[Kirishima from UA] 18:54

hnd well he hasnt answered a single one of my texts

[Kirishima from UA] 18:54

and when I try to call

[Kirishima from UA] 18:54

it says his phone is off

[Kirishima from UA] 18:54

but thats what its been saying for the last 2 weeks

Izuku inhales.

[Kirishima from UA] 18:55

im kind of worried about him

[You] 18:55

So you want to go see him face to face?

[Kirishima from UA] 18:55

yeah

[Kirishima from UA] 18:55

was planning to take a train tomorrow.

[Kirishima from UA] 18:56

and you were childhood friends so I figured youd know.

Izuku bites his lip and presses down into the slight give of his chair cushion. A phone turned off for weeks? Izuku has never had Kacchan's personal phone number but that sounds extreme even for him.

[You] 18:56

I could come with you. We can meet up tomorrow near UA and I'll take you to his house myself.

[Kirishima from UA] 18:57

dude that would be great! is that really ok for u?

[You] 18:58

Yeah. I've been wanting to go see him, but I don't think he wants to see me so when I went to his house a couple of weeks ago, he never answered the door. If it's you, I think he might. I've been worried about him too.

[Kirishima from UA] 18:58

bro !

Bro? Izuku blushes. He'll never get used to the easy affection of people like Kirishima and Ashido and Hagakure.

[Kirishima from UA] 18:59

you're a rlly good friend u know?

[Kirishima from UA] 18:59

thank u !

This is what Izuku means. He and Kirishima have talked a grand total of like… four times and the other boy is already calling him not just a friend, but a good one. He's made lots of friends since coming to UA, and easily too. Coupled with the counseling sessions, they've made him reframe what went so wrong in middle school, made him consider that it might've had nothing to do with Izuku and everything to do with the, as Iyashi-san had put it, shit environment.

You're not quirkless anymore though. They'd look at you different if you were.

He slaps his face lightly. Bad thoughts.

[You] 19:00

No problem! I'll see u tomorrow at 9?

Kirishima looks different with his hair down. Izuku wouldn't have recognized him, were it not for the other boy's enthusiastic waving from the bus stop in front of UA. From the school to Izuku's neighborhood it's a thirty-minute walk or ten minute tram ride, but Kirishima has to commute by train for forty minutes every morning. As they walk, he explains to Izuku that he lives in a smaller town north of Musutafu, but he doesn't get lonely on the way here, since he and Ashido live in the same area and ride the same train.

It's a lot of new information that Izuku carefully files away, but Kirishima is very easy to talk to, and Izuku is comfortable letting him take lead of the conversation, contributing with the occasional comment. When Kirishima brings up Crimson Riot and Izuku falls into a mutter storm about the hero by accident, Kirishima calls him manly of all things when he's done. Izuku gets why Kacchan likes him.

Speaking of Kacchan, the topic of him is not brought up, Izuku suspects by conscious effort on both their parts. Kirishima is about as energetic as usual, but Izuku can see the dark marks under his eyes that weren't there before the end of term, can hear the nervous edge of his laughter.

Once they've made it to his and Kacchan's neighborhood, the elephant in the room can no longer be ignored.

Kirishima seems surprised by the size of Kacchan's house, visible from

the very entrance of the street. He hadn't known Kacchan's parents are fashion designers, or that they work a lot to be able to afford it. He doesn't know anything about Kacchan's home life at all.

Izuku has no time to contemplate that, because when they've arrived in front of Kacchan's house, the front yard looks different. The mailbox upfront is toppled, the grass of the lawn is trampled, and a few flower vases by the gate are knocked over. It's like an overexcited five year old came and vandalized the house. The late July air goes from stifling to chilly as Izuku and Kirishima step closer to the front door, weary of the mess but unwilling to point it out.

Kirishima rings the doorbell and they hear the sound of it buzz, but even five minutes and five more presses later there's no reply. There's not even any noise coming from inside. Kirishima knocks on the door, calls out, nothing

"Try calling him again," says Izuku, fidgeting his fingers out of nerves. Something feels *wrong*.

The other boy nods and takes out his phone from his pocket to dial a contact labeled 'bakubro'. Izuku hears the phone ring, once, twice, three times, before the automated message starts playing ***The number you are calling is switched off. Please try again later. The number you are calling—*** Kirishima taps the end call button in frustration.

"That's what it keeps saying! Bakugou doesn't use his phone much so there have been times when it's died before and I had that same problem or times when he's switched it off for a while… but never for this long!" says Kirishima.

Izuku spins on his heel, walking up to one of the windows of the house to peer inside. It's hard, the windows are that type of glass that's reflective and many of them have curtains closed. Eventually, he finds a spot on the side of the house where he can kind of see the inside of the kitchen, and it looks messy.

It might've been years ago, but Izuku has never remembered Kacchan's house to be messy.

"Where are his parents?" questions Kirishima, and yeah, that's a pretty valid question. Auntie Mitsuki's car has not returned to the driveway.

Izuku bites his lip. "I don't know. They work a lot and go on frequent trips," he explains.

“This is far-fetched, but have you got their numbers?” Kirishima asks, growing restless.

“No... But my mom might. Let me text her.”

As they wait for Izuku’s mom to reply, they sit by the wall of the Bakugou’s property to avoid the too-bright sun. This is technically trespassing, what they’re doing, but Izuku can’t even bring himself to care. He glares at the house, scans the windows of the top floor for any sort of movement, but there’s nothing. It takes fifteen minutes for his mom to reply, confused over why Izuku is making her dig up Mitsuki’s number.

Izuku gives her a vague answer in an effort to lessen her worry, though it might end up counterproductive. Avoiding his mom’s questioning, he copies the number she sent into his phone app and presses the call button with a shaking hand. He puts the phone to his ear, and Kirishima comes to stand against him, seeking to overhear the call.

“Who’s this?” Izuku squints at the harsh, familiar tone. “*Do you have any idea what time it is?!”*

“A-auntie Mitsuki? It—It’s me, Midoriya Izuku?” He’s not sure why he says it like a question, but he hears the crackle of an inhale from the other end of the line.

“*Izuku?”* she says in disbelief. *“Has something happened?”*

Izuku doesn’t know and that’s the problem. “Have you talked to Kacchan recently?”

“Katsuki?” Now she’s in shock.*“If he did something to you again—”*

“He didn’t, he didn’t!” he says, a bit defensive. “I— just— he’s supposed to be at home, right?”

“Well, yes. We were set to leave on the day the brat got expelled. I told him to fix his crap and he got all mopey about it, hasn’t answered our calls since so we stopped trying.”

Right, okay, that’s… a lot. Izuku inhales to keep calm. “So you left him at home alone, and you haven’t talked to him in a month?”

“*He’s used to taking care of himself—*” A crackle. “*Shit-*”

Kirishima looks a little pale and Izuku himself feels faint, from the summer heat and everything else.

“I don’t think he’s at home Auntie Mitsuki,” he says, “I don’t think he’s been at home for a while. I’ve come three separate times and he hasn’t answered. I’m here right now, with one of his friends from UA, and he still isn’t answering.”

“*He could be sleeping. It’s like ten am over there, right? He sleeps in late*,” mutters Mitsuki, though she doesn’t sound like she believes it. “*Look, Izuku, there should be a spare key buried in the leftmost hanging planter on the front porch. I give you permission to go inside—*”

And that’s all Izuku needed. To be honest, he’d been fully prepared to knock down the door himself, permitted to or not. “I’ll call you back,” he says and hangs up before she can reply to join Kirishima, who’s already by the planter.

The spare key is there, buried under a thin layer of dirt and obscured by leaves. Izuku dusts it off and both of them rush to the front door, practically leaning on it as it rattles open.

The first thing he notices is the dust. Far too much of it, eager to escape the confines of the unlit hallway. The second is the smell of rotting food, coming from the bags of groceries dumped right in front of the door. It looks like they were dropped in a haste and Kirishima near sprints inside before Izuku puts out a hand to stop him.

“Don’t touch anything more than you have to,” he says barely able to keep himself from moving. Kirishima frowns but Izuku sees that he understands, slowing down his pace.

“I’ll do the ground floor,” he announces, and Izuku accepts, heading for the stairway, bypassing the very broken vase by its display stand.

The house is quiet. So, so quiet. The stairs don’t even squeak. Izuku opens a random door on the second floor, and is met with the master bedroom, in pristine condition were it not for the dust everywhere. Auntie said they’d been away for a month, and this room looks like it hasn’t been touched since the moment they’d left.

What he assumes to be their home studio is much the same, supplies packed away in neat piles, two desks sitting on opposite sides of the room, barren of anything on top. He leaves, doubting Kacchan would be hiding in a closet or something.

His actual hopes are with Kacchan's bedroom, which, apart from a fresh coat of paint and swapped posters, looks about the same as Izuku remembers from all those years ago. He holds his breath, approaching the bed, hoping by some odd chance that Kacchan is indeed asleep like Auntie Mitsuki said.

No such luck, the pillows and fitted sheet are all messed up, from someone trying to sleep he guesses, but Kacchan himself is nowhere to be found. Judging by the stale air of this room, no one has slept here for a good while.

The last room on this floor is the bath, whose over-the-sink medicine cabinet is left wide open, contents dumped all over the floor like Kacchan had been looking for something and never bothered to put the rest back in order.

It's like there's an alarmed All Might blaring warning sirens in Izuku's head, screaming: "THIS IS NOT FINE!"

As a last-ditch effort, he pushes open the door to what must be the attic, only to be met with a cloud of dust that makes him cough so much Kirishima yells if he's okay or not from downstairs. There's no way anyone could be living up there.

So if he's not here, or in his room, or in the bathroom, or the hall, where is he?

Izuku runs back to the first floor, skipping stairs four at a time.

"Did you find him?" he calls out, more than aware of the panicked tilt of his voice, "Kirishima-kun?! Kirishima-kun?" And when Izuku lays eyes on the living room, he understands why the red-head has paused.

If upstairs looked like no one had touched it in weeks, the living room looks like a borderline crime scene. There are food wrappers all over the floor, discarded chopsticks, the couch transformed into a makeshift bed. Though that wouldn't be all that worrying on its own, if it wasn't paired with visible char marks and the contents of the coffee table toppled over. It's like Kacchan had set off an explosion inside, for some reason.

"He isn't here," says Kirishima. Izuku's throat is so dry he can't even swallow. "He isn't anywhere, and his phone— it's in those bags by the door. I didn't want to touch them, but I peeked inside and it's sitting with a bunch of rotting apples. Where is he Midoriya?" His voice cracks but he sounds much calmer than he looks and definitely much

calmer than Izuku feels.

This is wrong. Everything is so so wrong and it doesn't make sense yet Izuku knows, a part of him had known the moment he'd peeked into the messy kitchen, that Kacchan is… Kacchan is gone.

"Call the police," Izuku says after a beat.

Two police officers in blue garb show up a grueling hour later as Izuku and Kirishima loiter around the Bakugou property. Izuku had asked a few of the neighbors next-door, two of which hadn't answered at all, one had been very rude, and the other claimed they'd heard an explosive sound some weeks ago then nothing since.

Kirishima explains to the officers what they think is going on, with the house in an obvious state of abandonment and no one having seen or heard from Kacchan in far too long. The officers nod and take their own preliminary look around the house before picketing down a warning tape to the front lawn. The signature yellow and black banner makes the situation all the more real, and Izuku knows that most of the clues in the hall and living room point to an attack.

No, he shouldn't be hasty. The house itself wasn't very damaged, not as damaged as it should be had Kacchan put up a fight against someone who might be attacking or trying to kidnap him, which, this is Kacchan, of course, he'd put up a fight. Could he have simply gone out? That's not it either, there's no reason for him to leave his phone, and the bedroom closet didn't look like it had things removed from it. Izuku had taken a peek at the contents of the bags by the front door, and they consisted of prepacked meals, some fresh fruits and vegetables, and meat products that had gone bad, they were groceries, which made sense, considering the kitchen pantry was empty. There was also a little pharmacy baggie. If Kacchan needed medicine for something, that would explain the disarray of the upstairs bathroom medicine cabinet. Going by the clues of the hallway, Izuku guesses Kacchan had returned from a shopping trip when *something* happened to him. What that something is… he doesn't know.

The officers drive them to the local police station and they're directed into civilian interrogation rooms to be asked questions, simple things like their relationship with Kacchan and why they visited, and how they got permission to go inside. Then, the lady from the reception shows up and slides Izuku a missing person report form, asking for as much of Kacchan's personal information as possible. Izuku has snapped three pens in half out of sheer stress by the time he's done

with all the pages. He's given a police case number when he hands in the report, and it dawns on him all over again that this is happening.

Izuku doesn't like the police station much, so when the officer assigned to him announces they can go free, Izuku is very ready to do so. Kirishima looks like a lost puppy when he meets Izuku in the lobby of the station, and seems just as eager as him to get out.

It's almost afternoon when the two of them walk back to Izuku's house.

"Thank you for having me, Midoriya-san." Kirishima bows to Izuku's mother as he takes off his shoes by the entrance. He hadn't wanted to bother them at first, but Izuku insisted his mother would be the opposite of bothered, and Kirishima looked like he needed a break.

"No problem. I always love to have Izuku's friends around!" His mother ushers them inside, mumbling embarrassing things about Izuku and asking what they'd like to eat. She notices their reluctance with ease and frowns. "What happened boys?" He and Kirishima share a glance, unsure, or unwilling to respond. Mom is quick on the uptake. "Why did you need Mitsuki's number, Izuku?"

Izuku's words get caught in his throat, and when his phone begins to ring in his pocket he takes it as a chance to escape, leaving poor Kirishima alone with his mother. "Sorry, I have to take this…"

He disappears into the hall, falling into a crouch against the wall.

"Young Midoriya? I got a call from detective Naomasa at the police station. Is everything alright?"

He'll never quite get used to having All Might of all people address him so casually, but today not even his mentor's familiar voice can make his worries simmer down. He gulps.

"No."

Bakugou Katsuki is officially declared missing the next morning.

Chapter End Notes

> I'll confess, Izuku is very hard for me to write because we are very similar and it's soooo easy to project on him and veer into OOC-ness. I'm scared I made him too chill but the general mood of this situation for him is disbelief. He hasn't quite processed it yet lol.

He also doesn't know quite how bad Katsuki's situation is.

This one should've probably gone between chapters 2 and 3 but it was much longer originally so i split it in half and we're in this pinch. Timeline wise here it's been something over two weeks since katsuki was kidnapped. Also, July 30th is Ashido's birthday but we are just gonna pretend it's not for the sake of the story lmao

I tried to keep up with Hori's thing for pun names, so Izuku's therapist is called Iyashi 癒し (according to the dictionary meaning healing; soothing; therapy; comfort; solace) Kyou 協 (meaning "unite, cooperate"). I'm not Japanese though so it's possible I've fucked these up.

Chapter 5: (Not so) Grand Escape

Chapter Summary

We're getting out of here boys.

Chapter Notes

hello friends (´。• ω •。`)

I'd like to clear a few things up first and foremost.

I saw some people confused by where this fic takes place within the canon timeline. The divergence starts after the very first term of UA, after Izuku and Katsuki's exam against All Might. That means that the canon summer camp had not yet happened and Aizawa and All Might hadn't visited Katsuki's home, so they don't know what his parents are like. Going by the anime, this fic starts after season two but before season three. Kamino happens in this chapter. I hope that makes sense.

About Katsuki's character, yeah he's an asshole but he's also a kid who grew up in an environment that rewarded him for the wrong things and built within him a very twisted perception of social hierarchy and a debilitating fear of weakness (like he has canonical panic attacks over it). His personality didn't come out of the void, and while he absolutely is a little bitch who deserves a good ass-kicking, he's also just a middle school bully with gifted child syndrome and nothing more. He may come off as impulsive but he generally listens to authority and follows the rules, and I don't think he's stupid enough to believe he can get away with murdering a classmate during training. He doesn't even try to kill any of the villains at USJ. In my eyes his constant "DIEE!" is a simple empty hype word. He even yells at tennis balls to die. It doesn't express an actual desire to kill people. My point is, I personally and subjectively see Katsuki as a highly flawed and misguided but still fundamentally redeemable and a good person, and that's the characterization I'm going to follow in this fic. Feel free to disagree because we respect all opinions in this house, but that's just my heads up.

Anyway, Bakuboy gets out today. This chapter is a bit shorter than usual, but I didn't want to drag it out for no reason. I'm nervous because this is probably not the route a lot of you were

expecting, but I did do my best to set it up lmaoo idk you'll see for yourselves.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He's going to die.

That's all Katsuki can think as he watches the pool of bright-colored blood under him expand. He's going to die and it'll be slow in the worst way possible. The building shakes with tremors from time to time. He guesses the heroes are here. But they're here for IcyHot, not him, and Katsuki doubts All For One was kind enough to leave the trapdoor open like he did the cell door. By the time this is over and a search party comes to check down here in full he'll be long gone. That is if the heroes even win this at all.

Shit. He presses his free palm against the gaping wound and it comes off blood-stained. He hopes his stomach isn't hit; being eaten by his own digestive acids does not sound fun. Nothing about this is fun. Maybe if he holds his breath long enough he'll die quicker of asphyxiation. He leans further back against the wall as the building shakes again, his abdomen burns and his vision goes pitch black. For a moment brief yet at the same time everlasting, Katsuki feels like he's stopped existing entirely.

When the building rumbles again eyes peel open without his consent, gaze suddenly clear and head unfuzzied. He blinks, then shakes his head. What the fuck are these thoughts? What happened to that guy who swore he'd never give up on his quest to be a hero, who'd been training from the moment his quirk appeared at four years old. What happened to that guy who used to be unshakeable? His iron will was his biggest object of personal pride, even of higher value in private than his quirk.

It hadn't been as iron as he'd thought, clearly. Watching his dream fall apart within a week was all it took to break him. He'd loitered around the house and neighborhood doing nothing, like a loser, and had let himself get captured with zero effort on Crusty's part, like a loser.

And now he's letting himself die, scorned by everyone in his life and forgotten, like a loser.

The open door of the cell taunts him. He decides right then that trying to get out can't hurt, and that if he's going to die, he at least wants to see the sky, the real one, one last time. So he has to get out of here and whatever chaos is happening upstairs is the perfect distraction.

The first order of work is getting off the cuff on his hand. It's shockproof, but surely enough force will get it to budge at least a little. He wills his palms to sweat, but nothing comes out. Not only does the tendon shift he uses to ignite his sweat not function anymore, but his palm is also dry. He isn't sweating at all. His quirk is… gone.

Shit. Shit. "Shit," he says to the empty cell.

Okay, this is fine. Everything is fine. He's going to die in a bit. He doesn't need his quirk. Explosions wouldn't work anyway. Yes. This is fine.

But he still needs a way to break his hand out of the cuff. How do they do it in the movies? They twist their hands into weird slim shapes to shimmy through without having to mess with the cuffs at all. He can do that. He straightens his fingers and bunches them together, but the difference between his wrist size and hand size is still too big. His thumb doesn't fit.

Okay then. Fuck his thumb. He doesn't need his thumb. His skin is turning blue. He's going to die soon anyway.

Shaking, he takes his other hand and presses his thumb into the ground at an awkward angle, and keeps making it awkward awkward awkward until there's a disgusting crunch and he can't keep a scream from escaping his throat. He hopes no one heard that. Breaking bones is easier than he's thought. His body isn't resisting at all.

His thumb is snapped, bones hanging like limp noodles under skin, kind of like what his leg looked like when Copy-cat Muscle-man broke it in half that one time. Looking at it is making him queasy but now that it's broken it's easy to maneuver if he ignores the pain, something he's gotten quite good at doing. He squishes all the fingers together with his still-functioning hand and pulls, watching as the hand slides through the cuff with little breathing room. He flings the cuff away, free of it at last.

The fingers on that hand hang loose, but that doesn't matter right now. What matters is that he's not tied down to anything for the first time in a month. And the door to his cell is open. Katsuki exhales. He can get out. He can do it.

Holding onto the wall for support with his left hand, he's surprised at how level-headed he's feeling, how much better his legs are doing at supporting him than he'd given them credit for. He winces at the squelching noise the puddle of blood makes when he gets up. It's a

substantial puddle, glowing orange and already starting to solidify at the corners, but thanks to the doctor, Katsuki knows the precise amount of blood he can lose before he goes into shock, and judging by the size of the pool, nothing super vital was hit, and he still has some time.

So he inches over to the door with strides as big as possible, stopping every other step to groan in pain from the friction of the wound being shifted. He pauses at the entryway, for a moment convinced this is all a dream or a hallucination, a cruel play by the doctor to make him feel like he has a chance, only to have it ripped away at the last moment. But nothing comes. Apart from the flickering overhead lights and shaking of the outside, there's nothing in the hallway.

He thinks about going straight to the stairway but changes his mind mid-step, heading instead for the wall of cubbies at the end of the hall. He doubts he can stop himself from dying with his beginner first aid knowledge, but he can wrap up his wound so the bleeding pauses for a bit and he buys himself time.

Rummaging through the drawers, he leaves everything in disarray out of spite. There's a ton of needles pumped with various liquids, some of which might be useful for healing, but he has no idea which is which and can't risk injecting paralytic into his bloodstream by accident, so he leaves them.

The very bottom drawer is full of simple wound dressing supplies; rolls of gauze and bandages and bottles of ointment and alcohol and distilled water. He grabs the water and after struggling to open it and get it into a suitable position, pours straight onto the hole in his upper abs. It stings, and he's supposed to clean his hands first to prevent infection, but he neither cares nor has the hands to pour with.

He unscrews a tub labeled antibiotic ointment and spreads the stuff all over (was his skin always so pale?), hissing and cursing at the pain. After this haphazard care is finished, he picks a roll of gauze and starts trying to roll it around his torso, a difficult feat when you only have one fully functional hand. He's forced to use the remaining fingers of his right hand for support, and he freaks a little when the gauze comes off his back blood-stained, which means All For One's spear thing pierced straight through and he didn't disinfect the back. It's fine. His front stings and the very bottom layers of gauze are already starting to redden.

"Fuck it," Katsuki repeats like a motto. It doesn't matter if he gets an

infection. His chances of living are in the minus. This is just a final push to die with some dignity.

He ties up the gauze and drops the remaining roll onto the floor. He'd left a trail of blood on the way here, but with his torso now bandaged, he isn't bleeding all over anymore. He walks as fast as his injured body can to the stairwell to freedom and curses when he sees the trapdoor shut.

It's heavy, but as far as Katsuki knows, the only thing keeping it shut is its weight and a weak push mechanism. He doesn't remember the doctor using a key when he was brought down here. So he rushes back to the wall of cubbies, searching for something to use as a crowbar. One of the doctor's hot-pokers, his second favorite elongated one, looks perfect. Katsuki pushes away the irrational part of his mind that insists he doesn't touch it because it will burn, and he grabs it and heads back to the stairs.

It takes a lot of maneuvering and prying and he's jostled his torso no less than four times before the weak latch of the door gives and it snaps open. Katsuki musters every bit of his strength and pushes, the trapdoor flying open and falling against the floor of the warehouse with a thud.

Cool air floods into the opening and a shiver runs through him. His ears are assaulted by the sound of metal being hammered, coming from everywhere and echoing inside the large warehouse. His hands go to cup his ears on instinct, and he hisses as his broken thumb presses against his face. He can't see, the difference in lighting between the inside of the warehouse proper and the chambers below way too big. He can't even hear his own breathing or heartbeat it's so loud. It's dark and there are all these deafening pattering noises with no source he can discern.

This is fine.

He drags himself out of the hole and onto the warehouse floor. A bright flash shows through the upper warehouse wall, and it's followed by a loud rumble. Lightning and thunder, it takes him a moment to realize. There's a storm. The hammering noise must be rain hitting the roof. His muscles slouch against the floor. He can handle rain.

He shifts to a standing position, cursing out his eyes that have still not adapted to the non-existent lighting. As he walks with great care, he

hears low, pained moaning and groaning noises that are definitely not coming from the rain, and he remembers that this place is a Nomu factory full of Nomus. Very dangerous Nomus.

Katsuki flinches as another shot of thunder tears apart the sky, and in all that darkness, trips backward on the mass of wires on the floor, barreling straight into some sort of control panel. He's pressed something in the chaos, and the tank he's crashed against glows radioactive green, the half-finished Nomu inside banging against the glass. He catches the hiss of an air seal being broken and he jumps backward as the glass at his side begins to shift, rolling down and into the floor.

Now he's done it. The glowing water inside spills with every centimeter of the glass lowered, and before the mechanism is even a quarter of the way done the Nomu is trying to squeeze through. Its dark form seems to bubble and foam, falling from the tank covered in goop and emitting some sort of effervescent dust.

Katsuki doesn't have time to back away from his position on the floor before he's grabbed and thrown violently against the wall. His torso burns, and when he coughs, his mouth tastes of blood. How the fuck is he not dead yet? The Nomu, unstable and fluorescent in the dark, moves as if it's in a daze, shifting back and forth to the beat of the rain. It draws nearer and Katsuki knows that if it gets to him he's fucked.

Think think think think—

A muscled, wet hand closes around his arm and flings him straight into another wall. He spits. At this rate, he'll die a mere dozen footsteps away from his goal. His quirk still doesn't work and his deteriorated muscles are in no shape for a physical fight. He flinches as the monster's large arm slams onto the floor in front of him, cracking concrete.

Katsuki's back is poked by a myriad of wires, and thinking back to the first time coming to the warehouse he recalls that this must be the power box, the one that he'd noted had been messy. And power box means electricity. He doesn't know how resistant Nomus are but cornered in the literal sense, he's got no other choice.

Snarling, he grabs hold of a thick mass of wires connected to the box and yanks, completely uncaring if he himself gets shocked. They come free with a ripping noise, ends fizzing and sparking with electric

particles.

This time, when the Nomu lunges at him, Katsuki shoves the bundle of exposed cables right into the thing's open mouth and holds it there even as sharp-nailed palms come to wrap around him. The Nomu squeezes and Katsuki screams, worried that his plan is stupid and he's about to kick the bucket. The electricity seems to pour into the Nomu in waves, traveling up its arms and straight to Katsuki too. He feels his own body spasm and go taught as he blacks out again.

When he comes to he's on the floor and everything hurts so bad, so much worse than it did before, like he's being stung in every direction. But the Nomu's grip is slack and it seems to have collapsed to the floor besides Katsuki in an unceremonious heap, foaming at the mouth, three eyes rolled back.

Katsuki doesn't take any chances, he musters the strength from god knows where and leaps (bad decision, fucking ow) from the Nomu's loose grip to run, staying near the wall of the warehouse to avoid another accident. Eventually, he comes to see a hole in the wall, the size of a giant fist. Someone was nice enough to make this for him. Maybe some things can actually go okay today!

If the difference in air quality between his cell and the warehouse had been noticeable only in temperature, the difference between indoors and outdoors is astronomical. He feels like a fish that's been out of water for a year and is finally put back. He lets his lungs flood with big heaves of fresh air, lets the droplets of rain hit his face and chest, cooling down his adrenaline fevered body. He isn't sure how long he lays against the cracked wall, eyes itching to close.

A great tremor breaks his daze, and he remembers that there's still a battle going on, which means he'll have to get out of here if he wants to die in peace. Inhaling deeply one last time, he hops through the opening and starts running towards somewhere that's not here, being careful not to leave himself exposed and ignoring the blinding stabs of pain (he's amazing at that now). He's made it this far. On the off chance that there's someone from the League lurking around here, he doesn't want to get caught.

Waves of air pressure hit him and tussle his matted hair. Unable to resist curiosity, he hides behind a big shipping container and peeks from its edge. What he sees is a huge, battle-leveled field. All For One is there, and so is that goopy monstrosity of an aura. A blur of red and yellow smashes into the villain, and their exchange sends dust rising

hundreds of meters. When the cloud clears Katsuki realizes it's All Might who's fighting All For One, and that childish, fanboy part of his heart soars, instantly more at ease.

As they part a good distance, Katsuki sees that All Might himself is also surrounded by masses of shifting substances, their color a clear pale blue much more pleasing than All For One's grey-green, but aside from the color, he's struck by how similar they look. Goosebumps break out onto his skin and he berates himself for paying so much mind to dying-induced hallucinations.

The clash between All For One and All Might continues in full force, their blows so potent they change the falling trajectory of the rain. When a chunk of debris crashes atop the container Katsuki is sitting behind, Katsuki reminds himself he needs to leave or he'll get caught in the crossfire.

Uttering a private prayer for All Might's victory, he scans the area for an escape route and rushes through the maze-like containers and warehouses of the ward, trying to get as far away from the battle as possible.

Shipping containers and factories melt away into open streets, and Katsuki's heart hammers in his chest. He almost slips against the wet road, and he's leaving bloodstained puddles in his wake. But he doesn't care, not really. Even as every bit of his body aches and his gaze grows fuzzy, he doesn't think he's ever experienced such a pure sense of freedom. Is this why that bastard Deku tried to kill himself every time he fought? Being on the brink of death but free … it's nice, exhilarating.

Or maybe he's just lost it.

He makes it to a crossroads, and voices filter into his ears. He hides behind a building on instinct, stealing slight glances towards the source of the talking.

"—condition, we should get him to a hospital,"

It's an ambulance, two or so paramedics dressed in blue fussing over someone laid on a bed inside while a hero with long cream-colored hair Katsuki hazily recognizes as Mt.Lady in shrunk form explains something to a coat clad police investigator. Colorful matter of different consistencies bounces around them. He blinks. These hallucinations are persistent.

“—got intercepted. It was like he expected us. We broke in and restrained the Nomus in emtpy air, and then he popped out of nowhere and disposed of Jeanist in an instant. I don’t even know what he did to me, but my quirk wasn’t working properly…. Woke up in time to help those UA kids… get away—”

This is Katsuki’s chance. He can call for help. The stab wound is major, but the fact that he’s still up and walking means that it’s not yet deadly. If he gets proper medical care now he’ll make it. Running into the heroes like this is the best thing that could’ve happened.

Yet, faced with this chance, he hesitates.

So he runs to the heroes and they take pity on him and help. What then? He doesn’t have his place at UA. His parents had said they regretted ever having him. No hero course will ever take someone like him again and the HPSC will never give him a license. No support and with a mountain of bad press, making it to any half-decent general school will be by itself difficult. Even if he’s accepted to some other school, his messes will follow him and he’ll be outcasted.

And on the one in a million chance that he manages to fix everything? Say his parents forgive him and so does Deku and he gets his spot at UA back, which does he even deserve really? Say all that happens by magic, what then? He looks down at the mangled thumb of his right hand, the thumb he can’t even feel anymore because he’s likely broken it wrong and damaged the nerves there. His arms are burnt and scarred to bits, his left leg is littered with poorly healed cuts from the blood loss tests, his torso is covered in poker burns and there’s a motherfucking hole straight through it.

To top it all off, his shitty quirk doesn’t work. He doesn’t have it anymore. He’s quirkless.

No matter how wild a scenario Katsuki thinks of in his head, he can never see himself having any sort of decent life if he goes with the heroes now. That’s not his world anymore. He was kicked out with all the fanfare and now he’s damaged goods they have no reason to take back.

Katsuki would rather end up dying today, on his own terms, than be forced to live through a life he’s never wanted with dreams made impossible to achieve.

(And Best Jeanist is in that ambulance, the Best Jeanist who made it very clear that Katsuki emitted unadulterated villain vibes and

required taming like a feral animal, then proceeded to ruin Katsuki's meticulous natural explosion-shaped hairstyle for the sake of his stupid bowl cut jean empire. He knows where Best Jeanist stands, and it's not by Katsuki's side. So fuck him. And fuck his obnoxious out of fashion skinny jeans. He's not going back to *that*.)

So he waits behind the corner of the building until the whirring noise of the ambulance goes quiet and it disappears from view behind a turn. He goes the opposite way, blaming the downpour for the wetness on his cheeks.

It becomes clear pretty soon that this was the wrong way to go because it's a descending road, which means the water level increases bit by bit until the path is flooded entirely. The rain isn't letting up, and when he looks back to where he came from, the road is blocked by debris that continue to fly and crash into each other.

Huh. He can't go further unless he wants to take an unsolicited bath in city flood and sewer water, which does not sound appealing even to his currently confused brain. So now what? Does he roll over and die right here? Does he wait it out for the storm to stop? Will he even live that long? Probably fucking not, the water where he walks is stained a toxic orange-red from his blood, that could be leaking all the way from his abdomen wound or could be from his bare feet he walked over here on.

The point is he's bleeding, and he feels lightheaded. He looks around for a spot in this area that might be dry, and his eyes catch on a phone booth some meters away, one of those rare ones whose walls reach flush with the floor at the bottom, sitting in only a small layer of water. Alright. Let's go over there then. It's so fucking cold and being wet is not helping.

The phone booth's glass door is heavy (or maybe Katsuki's just weak). He opens it and gets inside as fast as he can, allowing it to slam back closed to avoid it further filling with water. The amount that's in here is much less than that outside on the street, and the harsh stutter of rain is reduced to a melodic beat that can't reach him.

His legs give out and he sinks to the asphalt cross-legged sloshing the water there, pants puffing with it. God, he's been wearing these for like a month straight. They must smell like shit. He hasn't had a shower or a haircut or a proper bathroom for a month straight. He must smell like shit.

The contents of his puffed pockets float outside, soaked cards and bills. A further inspection unearths two very wet ten yen coins. One of the cards is a particularly bright color, and the water has made it bleed its ink onto the money, turning it a sun yellow.

It's the card for my shop. I don't give this to many people you know, but you saved me, so I owe you a debt. Call if you ever need help and I'll pay you back for today.

Right, that grandma from the alley with the weird eyes. Katsuki wonders what would happen if he called. He's found himself at this convenient phone booth so… It's not that he's asking for help, because he's not a nerd, he's calling in a debt. It's not like the tiny hag will pick up either way and if she does, it's not like she'll show up.

Katsuki wants to ring her up for the hell of it. So he'll do it.

He squints at the phone from where he's sitting, unwilling to get up. He reaches out for it, but his hand seems to lose its strength mid-way, and he coughs, hard. His entire world tilts and he doesn't even feel it when his body goes limp, banging against the edge of the glass. Everything is dark for three blessed seconds, and then he's up and running again. He groans, rubbing his forehead with a wet hand. Where was he? What the fuck was he doing?

Right, the phone. With a renewed fervency, the numbers he reads on the card, a shock of black against the yellow, he inputs into the little green payphone, along with one of his ten yen coins. The water tickling his ankles is bright orange. He grabs the phone receiver and puts it to his ear, leaning his shoulder against the glass of the booth for support.

It rings, once, twice, three times, four. She won't pick up, he thinks. That is until there's a click and the line connects.

"*Hello*?" comes the staticky voice.

"Uh…Remember me, blond exploding dude who saved your ass in that alley?" he says, voice surprisingly stable for how…. off he's feeling. It's like he's hit that moment of near-death clarity. "I'm calling in that debt so… come pick me up?"

This is stupid, so utterly stupid. He regrets calling at all, even as he's clutching the phone. Who's to say he can trust her? Who's to say she won't turn out to be a fucking weirdo? Or like a human trafficker or some shit? She's a stranger, for fuck's sake. What is the oh-so

supposedly great Bakugou Katsuki even doing, asking to be picked up like a fucking toddler?

But on the other hand, he hasn't got much to lose, has he? With how things are looking, he won't even have his life anymore soon. He can take a chance. A gamble. *Fuck* the great Bakugou Katsuki and his obnoxious stupid pride. She won't come either way and like this, he can at least pretend he made *some* effort to live.

There's no sound from the phone for a little, and Katsuki's eyes almost close until. "*Where are you?"*

Where *is* he? He squints around the booth trying to find some identifying mark. The local phone book is dedicated to Kamino, Yokohama.

"Kamino, Yokohama," Katsuki says, spitting out some bits of bright blood. "I'm i-in this phone booth a few blocks away from this b-big ass fight and I'm bleeding a bunch. All Might is …." He gives her some more details of the surrounding area until the line goes dead due to his call minute running out.

He lets the receiver go.

A chill creeps into his bones and he swallows down his nausea, too tired to even puke. The glass of the booth rattles from the wind but doesn't give. On the bright side, in here, he's safe. No one would think he'd go into a flooded area while injured, much less into a phone booth. No one will find him but possibly weird eyes lady. No doctors, no villains, no heroes, no parents, no Dekus. Freedom.

Everything feels wet. His face, his hair, his pants. With the last of his strength, he touches his bandaged wound with his left fingers. They come off red. This is it. He coughs.

He has a lot of regrets, he didn't get to do anything he wanted to do, and he feels kind of bad for the unlucky sob who'll find his body. But he's so tired.

So he closes his eyes and falls asleep to the melody of rain.

Chapter End Notes

> There are a lot of important details in this chapter. A few OCs are gonna be introduced properly in the upcoming chapters, but the canon characters will still be an important part of the story. I

know I tend to dislike OCs when I read other stories, but I wanted Katsuki to be away from the rest of the cast for a while, and it would be unrealistic for him to do everything on his own. But you'll see. I'll try my best to make them well-rounded characters.

If you're wondering how the fuck Katsuki survived all that with a hole in his abdomen, well... ˚₊✧ ヽ(⁰▿⁰)ノ ✧₊˚

Your theories give me life so please leave thoughts below. Thank you so so much for all the positive reception this fic has received because it's honestly mind-boggling! The comments especially they truly put the biggest smile on my face.

Chapter 6: Petition to give Aizawa Shouta a break

Chapter Summary

The one where Aizawa has a bad time.

Chapter Notes

I struggled a lot with this one ngl. It was originally a very different chapter, because the story was very different too, and I've changed the structure a lot. Sorry to leave you guys with another cliffhanger on Katsuki's condition, but I thought this was an ok place to put this one. Aizawa is hard because it's difficult to get the balance between harsh and caring just... idk. Not my best chapter fair warning.

Also, I'm sorry I can't reply to every comment. I love reading all your speculations but sometimes it's hard to reply to them without giving things away. Just know that I read and appreciate all of it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The car rattles on the bumpy road. Shouta is tired. He's so tired he could roll into a ball of sleeping bags and sleep into the next century. He's so tired he could close his eyes and enter dreamland in an instant, even sitting as he is. But he isn't allowed to do that. Because he's a responsible adult, and responsible adults have a lot of work to do.

Of course, Shouta couldn't have picked a simple line of work. He could've been an office worker, or a secretary, or a trash truck driver. Those would've been easier, not stress-free, no job was, but easier. Better than this. But no, Shouta had chosen to be a hero, and he'd been roped into teaching future heroes to boot. It's a recipe for disaster.

And a disaster it has been. Shouta isn't sure what's wrong with his homeroom class this year, but depending on how you look at it, class 1-A should be considered either lucky or cursed. On one hand, they already have more real villain encounter experience than most second and some third years, on the other hand, *they already have more real villain encounter experience than most second and some third years.* It's a

miracle that they're all still alive and relatively unharmed except, and Shouta quells the chill that comes along with the memory of the blue fire user of the League and their encounter at the training camp that follows the thought.

Ah, the training camp. Mess after mess that Shouta has to clean. After they'd been informed of Bakugou's disappearance, the faculty had discussed for a long while on whether it was worth holding the camp at all. The truth is, the details surrounding Bakugou's case are frustratingly unclear. There's an utter lack of evidence. Apart from a few recordings of the kid going into supermarkets and such over a month ago, he seems to have vanished into thin air. The computers in his house containing footage from the installed security cameras had gone right with him. It could be any number of reasons. It could be that he'd run away on his own. Or it could be that he'd gotten attacked. But no one could really be sure if this hypothetical attacker had been motivated by some connection to Bakugou as a UA student (like the League) or someone entirely different who'd grown a grudge against the kid following the huge media backlash of his expulsion.

Shouta went out of his way to avoid the media and their crap, so while he'd had a vague inkling that Bakugou was getting criticized, he hadn't known that what was happening in actuality could better be described as the kid getting ripped apart. Shouta still thinks expelling Bakugou had not been a bad decision, but the way they'd dealt with the aftermath of it, he'll admit, left a lot to be desired. For starters, they hadn't known Bakugou's parents left him on his own for prolonged periods of time and had been doing so for years, even when Bakugou was young enough that it would be considered child abandonment.

Second, they'd stood by after facilitating a hate storm from a quarter of Japan directed at a teenager of barely sixteen. Bakugou's retrieved phone revealed thousands of hate texts sent directly to him over the course of the month, and they ranged from petty insults to full-on death threats. Coupled with the constant media scrutiny and the less-than-kind online posts and articles, it added up to one of the largest cases of targeted harassment and privacy invasion in the last decade. Or so they'd been informed.

Shouta tightens his grip on his coffee cup, taking slow languid sips. All Might, prone to carsickness and unable to understand how Shouta can drink coffee in a moving car, watches from the corner of his eye beside him. Shouta gulps down the coffee and relishes in the kick it brings.

No, it's not the expulsion that Shouta regrets. But rather the fact that they'd basically pinned Bakugou to a crucifix and left the kid to fend for himself with no support.

Spurred on by that particular situation (and ignoring the very uncomfortable feeling in his chest that grows with every reminder that Bakugou is still very much missing) the school had been unsure of whether to continue with the plans for the training camp or not. In the end, they opted for keeping Bakugou's missing declaration under wraps and going through with the camp, only delayed by a week.

It had been a bad decision.

He'd thought they'd been careful with preparations. Changing locations often and only picking the final one at the last moment. Not telling the students. Having them make their own path through the mountain instead of taking the direct ground route. Exchanging the UA labeled buses for generic, nondescript ones. They'd even refused to hire any cleaning and kitchen staff, opting instead to have the students take care of it as part of their training.

It hadn't worked. The League still found the location. Nezu believes there might be some traitor amongst the UA staff, but Shouta also has to admit the students had not been discreet in their training and anyone would have spotted them from miles away in the forest. That left the question of how the forest had been found in the first place, but Shouta is already at the end of his rope, and he doesn't feel like thinking about that right now.

The villains had managed to take Todoroki Shouto, who was becoming one of Shouta's top problem children in the absence of Bakugou. The media theorized it was meant to be a show of strength on the League's end, with All Might having no known family, the number two's hero-in-training son was the next best victim to send a message. Endeavor had been pissed of course, and a team of the best heroes around was quickly put together to retrieve Shouto.

His own students had gotten involved, lead by number one problem child Midoriya who'd slushied his arms not two or three days prior, and surprisingly, Kirishima, who Shouta hadn't been aware was friends with Todoroki. He suspects there might be something else at play there, but he'll have to look into it when the break is over and the students move into the dorms.

As stupid as it was for the students to get involved, Shouta has to

admit that had they not been there things could've gone very badly. They'd taken Shouto out of the action and into safety at a critical moment, allowing All Might to fight All For One with no distractions. They'd also kept away from the fight themselves, which had been the smart thing to do. They'll get a huge scolding come the second term for sure, but Shouta will allow himself his private pride; they're already on the road to becoming great heroes.

In the end, Todoroki had been retrieved with barely a scratch on his own body, two injured heroes, the symbol of peace retired, a supervillain captured, and society thrown into chaos. They'd won the battle but lost the war is what it feels like. Shouta is relieved that at the very least, it's UA catching most of the media backlash and not Shouto himself, who has enough major personal problems and doesn't need more on his plate.

The car stops. Speaking of Todoroki, his house, despite being more modest than Shouta expected, is still about as well kept and intimidating as a royal palace. Shouta… Shouta doesn't really want to do this. Much less alone. But All Might has been his 'buddy' for the house visits, and judging by Endeavor's personality, Shouta didn't think it would be the best idea to have skeleton All Might come face to face with the person he'd left the burden of number one to just yet.

So he is going to do this.

A porter greets him at the door and Yagi wishes him good luck from inside the car. The older hero looks entirely too happy to leave this one to Shouta, and that's neither comforting nor funny. He'll force All Might to replace all the coffee machines in the staff room out of pocket after this as payback, he swears.

For now, Shouta greets the porter back and steps inside the estate, following a winding path into the main house. It's the type of house Shouta hates. The architecture and design is beautiful, don't get him wrong, but it's, so vast, so *unhomely*, that it makes him uncomfortable. But he doesn't want to judge a book by its cover or be hasty in his observations, so he files away the red flags for another moment.

Endeavor, is as expected, not there to meet him. Instead, he meets Todoroki in the living room with a woman who Shouta knows can't be his mother, so she must be his sister. They exchange their formal greetings and then Fuyumi, indeed Todoroki's older sister, sits them at the table and offers Shouta some black tea. He takes it without hesitation.

“Due to the recent incident,” he starts, “UA has proposed moving students into dorms on campus as a safety measure.” The two siblings are quiet as Shouta explains the technicalities of the dorm system and its benefits. Though they don’t interrupt, Shouta can tell that Fuyumi is listening intently, while Todoroki looks like he’s got his head in the clouds a bit more than usual.

“I understand that you might have reservations, considering the school has failed to offer protection on several other instances, and Shouto was the direct victim of the kidnapping, but UA will truly do everything in its power to never have a repeat of this situation again and this is a step towards that objective. It’s your choice of course,” he finishes.

“Oh, nonsense Aizawa-sensei,” says Fuyumi, “I’d say UA is the only school that has proven itself capable of protecting students from villains, considering that, thank god, there have been no casualties even after three separate attacks. It’s not your fault that you keep getting targeted. Besides, UA is father’s alma mater, I doubt he’d have Shouto sent anywhere else.”

Shouta slumps in his seat, relieved despite having known full-well that would be the answer. This visit is more for formality than anything, there’s no way the number one would pull his hero-in-training son out of school during such a critical moment for the stability of society. Still, it’s a weight lifted off Shouta’s shoulders.

His gaze shifts to Shouto, who looks kind of small sitting cross-legged like this. A kid. *Are you going to be able to protect them, Eraserhead?* Mumbles the voice of the blue fire user in his mind. Shouta shakes his head. He’s already failed too many times. He won’t— he can’t afford to ever have a repeat.

Fuyumi clears her throat. “And Sensei, I want to thank you. I watched the press conference, and what you said about Shouto— I’m a teacher too so I can tell— I thought you really see him, as Shouto, and not just father’s son. So thank you. Shouto tells me he’s really happy at UA, right?”

“Yeah,” says Shouto, who’s been snapped out of his little stupor, “I want to keep attending and move into the dorms.”

“It’s a done deal then.” Fuyumi smiles, before a faint crashing noise shakes the house. Shouta startles, for a moment convinced there’s an earthquake or they’re under attack. Fuyumi raises a placating hand,

looking sheepish, but Shouta noticed the way the sound made her almost flinch. “Father has not been taking the news of All Might’s retirement… well. He’s been spending most of his time in the training room…”

Well, that explains Endeavor’s absence then. Shouta gets it, the pressure on Endeavor is high right now, but it’s been a good week and a half already. This is a little… over the top. Another red flag flies up. He surveys the two siblings, looking all too unfazed by this sort of behavior, and something tells Shouta that it’s not due to the deadpan Todoroki disposition.

Their mother admitted to a mental hospital for a decade, one brother dead in unknown circumstances, another nowhere to be seen, and a sister having essentially taken over the role of the caretaker. Shouto’s unwillingness to use his fire side to its full capabilities, the obvious internal turmoil in the sports festival that caused him to throw his match against Bakugou…

It’s really red flag after red flag with this kid. Domestic abuse by the number one hero… the consequences of that make Shouta’s head hurt and despite how much he itches for it not to be true, he has a hunch, looking at these two, that that’s exactly what he’s dealing with.

I want to move into the dorms.

A fitting way to say he wants to get out of here.

Shouta pinches the bridge of his nose.

Okay.

He’ll talk to Todoroki again and confirm his suspicions, then they’ll find where to go from there.

Todoroki is for sure the new problem child number two. The drifting thought of the previous problem child number two and his still unknown whereabouts is buried with a swiftness. No time for that now. Shouta addresses the two siblings again,

“I hope both of you know that, considering the difficulty of the current situation, you have our full support. Not just from the institution, but from me, personally.” Their eyes widen. “As you said Fuyumi-san, Shouto is my student and therefore my responsibility, so if you need aid, in *anything*—” He makes sure to stress this part. “—do not hesitate to contact me.”

He knows they got what's he's referring to.

"Thank you for the concern sensei. We'll be alright. I have my own job and Shouto will be living at the dorms very soon. I— I appreciate the offer and will take you up on it if I ever need to. I'll make sure Shouto is safe."

He's pissed because their reactions all but affirm his assumption. Fuyumi's gaze is soft, but she has the air of someone who's stood by for too long and regretted it. Though Fuyumi might have a meek, non-confrontational demeanor, Shouta thinks, in that moment, that she's a whole lot stronger than she lets on.

Shouta nods to them once more, reaffirming they'll continue this conversation another time, and turns to say goodbye, eager to move on to the next house and get as much work done today as possible.

"Uh, Sensei," Todoroki calls to him just as he's about to leave, "Could I speak to you, in private?"

Shouta's eyes narrow, but he accepts, and Todoroki guides him to another waiting room, out of earshot of his sister.

"It's about something the villains said that I forgot to mention during my interview."

As far as Shouta knows, the villains had not laid much of a hand on Todoroki during the three days he spent in captivity. According to the kid himself, they'd been trying for some recruitment tactic using 'the pressure of being a top hero's son' as an argument, though if Shouta's suspicions are true, it may have instead had something to do with how Endeavor behaves at home if the League had somehow figured this out.

He isn't going to lie, Shouta's been worried about how Todoroki might handle the aftermath of this. He doesn't seem like the type of kid who's easily shaken, and Shouta has gone to great lengths to ensure no blame is placed on him by the media (he'll never make that mistake again) and by the kid himself. But a kidnapping is a big deal. The collapse of a symbol is a big deal. It wouldn't be surprising if even the most stoic of kids was having a rough time of it.

"On the second day of being tied up, that schoolgirl, Toga?" Shouta nods in confirmation, urging him to continue. "She said I was 'much quieter than the blond one'. When I asked, she said there was another 'one like me' before the Warp Gate shushed her."

Shouta's heart falls to his ass. It's ridiculous, two sentences and there's a flash of being seventeen again, and it's raining and he's high on defeating the villain and he's yelling out Shirakumo's name— Had Toga been implying what Shouta thinks she'd been implying?

He'd known hadn't he? He'd had a feeling that it was the League. That the kid hadn't just run away on his own, wasn't going through some failure-fueled rebellious phase. But he hadn't wanted to believe it. Because it meant...

Todoroki's miss-matched eyes bore into him.

"Sensei… Is something happening—" *Don't say it.* "—with the Bakugou situation?" *Fuck.*

Shouta claps him on the shoulder with confidence he's not feeling. "… I don't know," he answers honestly, "I'll make sure to relay it to the police."

"Someone you trust, right?" Leave it to Todoroki to be suspicious of everyone with the slightest bit of authority. Shouta heard about how the kid had called the chief of the police a mutt following the Stain incident because he gets all that type of news regarding his students, illegal means or not.

"Yes." The answer seems to satisfy Todoroki. Shouta remembers something then. He pulls a card from his pockets (bless joggers) and offers it to Todoroki. "Details for Hound Dog's counseling service."

His student stiffens, apprehensive. "It's nothing to be ashamed of—" Shouta assures him. "—if you ever need it. Most of the UA faculty has gone to therapy at some point. Hero work isn't all flowers and smiles."

"Midoriya started going," mumbles Shouto, and yeah, he knows. He's the one who recommended Hound Dog to problem child number one in the first place. "I'll think about it. Thank you Sensei."

"I take it went well Aizawa-kun?" asks All Might once Shouta is back in the car and they're on their way to Jirou's house.

Shouta sighs, "Of course. The answer was obvious anyway. "

"And how was Endeavor taking my… retirement?" It's still a touchy subject for All Might, and Shouta thinks it'll continue to be for a long time.

“Not well,” he says because he’s not a sugarcoater. All Might deflates even further somehow. “You should talk to him, at some point.”

The older hero makes a sigh of agreement before falling into silence. The occasional bounce of the car against the road and the hum of the engine almost lulls Shouta to sleep. He’s always so sleep-deprived he can close his eyes and drift away anywhere.

“I had a favor to ask, Aizawa-kun.”

“Hmm?”

“I would like to handle Young Midoriya’s visit on my own.” Shouta blinks one eye open, surveying All Might through his bangs. It’s no secret that the hero has a soft spot for problem child number one, and said problem child’s backstory had made Shouta more than a little suspicious. The relationship these two have goes beyond that of a regular student and teacher, but Shouta can’t place just how far beyond. “Think of it as repayment. For making you do this one by yourself.”

Oh, now All Might is speaking his language. Shouta wants to know what their relationship is, but he wants a break much more. He’s also worried about how the problem child’s mother will react to all of this, it would surely guarantee him another headache.

you promised him Bakugou would be ok and look how that turned out

“Alright,” he says and tries not to think what horrible fate he might have indirectly pushed his most volatile ex-student into.

As it seems, the world does not like Shouta at all today, because not five minutes after they’ve left Jirou’s house (with yet another positive answer) All Might gets a call that makes him pale.

“—no, of course, we’ll come right away,” he says into his phone and fixes Shouta with a grave look the moment he’s turned the call off.

“My detective friend, Tsukauchi,” he explains, “said they had important new information surrounding the case of…Young Bakugou. He’s just been assigned to it.”

Tsukauchi, the lead investigator for League-related incidents. Great.

All Might looks, if possible, even queasier than Shouta feels. If there’s

one thing these few months of working with him have taught Shouta, it's that Symbol of Peace-sama has hero and savior complexes the size of the sun, and coupled with being the proctor for the exam that determined Bakugou's expulsion, Shouta assumes he's jumping to even more horrible guilt-fueled conclusions than he is.

Neither of them says a word after informing the driver to change course for the central police station, and the façade of the familiar building feels like a looming death sentence.

They shuffle through the somewhat busy halls, getting their fair share of stares because skeleton or not, All Might is still All Might. He guides Shouta to Tsukauchi's office. Tsukauchi is a senior detective, so he's managed to land himself a personal, albeit small, space. The walls are lined with boards of cork, pinned with papers and sticky notes and photos of various cases he's working on, while the little desk in the center is piled high with neat stacks of documents. There's not much space left over for anything but a wheeled desk chair, two rows of file cases, and a small couch.

"Toshinori, Eraserhead," Tsukauchi greets from his seat behind the desk, looking frazzled. His serious expression melts into sheepishness. "Sorry for the mess in here, it's been a rough few days."

Shouta waves him off and leans against the door, allowing All Might to take the couch. Tsukauchi's standards are too high. It isn't even messy as far as Shouta is concerned. He gets it and happens to be the last person who'd care about a mess, especially not now. He likes this office, has always liked his spaces small and lived in.

"Don't worry about it," echoes All Might. "What was it that you wanted us to know?" he asks, and Tsukauchi's demeanor shifts right back into senior-detective mode. Shouta is not super close to Tsukauchi, but he does prefer him to many of the other detectives at the station, for this reason, he's pleasant and has a professional no-nonsense attitude. He gets work done with no fanfare.

"As you know, the hideout raid involved two of the League's safe houses, the bar, and the Nomu factory. Best Jeanist and Mt.Lady secured the fully-formed Nomus in the factory before they were intercepted, and we've got an even better understanding of how they're made now. They seem to have a human base, often a corpse, that's treated with a mix of steroids and quirk enhancing drugs, then equipped with multiple quirks."

Shouta suppresses a wince, having first-hand experience with the monstrous things. The fact that they're human is not comforting. All Might nods beside him, it seems the older hero knew this information already. *Number One privileges.*

"Best Jeanist and Mt.Lady didn't note this in their initial report, but the forensics team that was sent into the factory later discovered a barren office and a trapdoor right in front of it, leading to some sort of holding cell area. We assume the office belongs to whoever is helping the League make the Nomu, but it was wiped clean of any evidence. As for the rooms beneath, they seem to be cells for live subjects."

Live subjects. Missing kid. Nomus made of corpses. Live subjects.

Tsukauchi looks grave as he leafs through a folder on his desk. Shouta hears All Might suck in a breath when four or so photos are placed in front of them. Two show polished metal rooms, squeaky clean and with no natural light, and the rest various medical mechanisms for Shouta guesses… torture purposes. He shudders and doesn't look at them for longer than a beat.

Don't tell him this is going where he thinks it's going. Nope. No.

"Ragdoll confirmed this for us. She overheard they were going to deliver her to a holding facility, but time ran out and All For One took her quirk straight up." Good thing too, Shouta thinks to himself. Better quirkless than tortured or dead.

"And how does this relate to Young Bakugou?" asks All Might.

A pit settles in Shouta's stomach. It wouldn't have been a lie to say Bakugou had been Shouta's favorite student. He'd been aggressive and rude and lacking in social skills, but Shouta had never seen anyone with the same single-minded drive to be not just any hero, but the undisputed best. Coming in he'd been arrogant, the type of kid who was used to being at the top and had a hard time coming to terms with his new reality.

Shouta had elected to be lax with his punishment for Bakugou's little tantrums, often sticking to calling the kid out rather than dishing out things like detention, which he had a feeling wouldn't do much. He'd hoped UA's natural cutthroat environment would wear his rough edges down. Looking back, he can't help but feel he'd been too lax. Bakugou showed signs of improvement for sure, and his final test with Midoriya, the one person in the class he had a particular bone to pick with, was supposed to be a proper confirmation of that.

When they failed, Shouta was disappointed. He'd gone to chastise them, and hadn't expected Midoriya to come out and reveal in a fit of frustration that even though he'd tried for years, he and Bakugou couldn't get along, and the other boy had bullied him since they were children. Problem child number one looked like he regretted his entire existence when the admission left his mouth, but Shouta wasn't about to allow such a serious problem to go unaddressed.

Midoriya had a leaky mouth, and the picture he painted of his childhood, while not pretty, explained all his strange behaviors. Shouta had on his hands a student who was told he was worthless his entire life, and now had self-preservation instincts in the minus. As unusual as it was for a quirk to come in so late, Bakugou hadn't denied it, and it would also put into perspective Midoriya's bad control over his super strength. If anything it made him all the more impressive, he was already up to par and even above many classmates after mere months of having a quirk.

Bakugou's behavior towards Midoriya meanwhile, took a whole new, much nastier light. Shouta couldn't deny that Bakugou had been out of line many times even while at UA, from trying to attack Midoriya violently on quirk apprehension day to hitting him unprovoked during the exam where they were instructed to work together. He and Nezu had discussed and reviewed footage for over an hour while the two boys waited. Bakugou seethed the entire time, and maybe it had been a mistake not to let him cool down before questioning him, because he'd been clearly blinded by anger.

Shouta took drastic measures and expelled him.

Bakugou's determination to be a hero was like no other's; he'd surely bounce back, and Midoriya needed a firm show of teacher and adult support to start regaining his self-worth. It had seemed like a good solution at the time, Shouta still thinks it was, despite the unsavory aftermath which seems to only be getting worse and worse Any worry he might have had about the effects of the expulsion for Bakugou was soon forgotten, washed away by the rush of preparing for the camp, the camp itself, and the awful fallout.

The kid disappearing had never been on the plan.

"We collected hundreds of DNA samples from the factory in an attempt to match the Nomu to who they were originally and we got a lot of matches. People from unsolved missing person cases, accidents or deaths where a body was never found, going back several years for

the finished Nomus."

When Tsukauchi has paused for too long and All Might looks like he wants to be anywhere but here Shouta sucks in a breath to ask: "Are you saying one of them was Bakugou?"

Tsukauchi shakes his head. "No, not that. The DNA matching worked well for the Nomus so we tried to do the same with leftover evidence from the cells underneath. There were three down there, and the third wasn't clean—"

Shouta is handed another photo, one showing a room with the same layout as the other two, but covered in reddish-brown marks and smears, *words*, a worn medical table at the front, some sort of glass box blackened at the edges embedded in the wall, a large puddle of blood in one corner and bloody footsteps leading to the door. He looks at it for all of five seconds before giving it to All Might.

"—It looked like it was in recent use, and well, it has Bakugou's DNA all over it."

All Might drops the picture like it burned him while Shouta's own fingers feel numb. There was blood *everywhere* in that room. Shouta's dealt with and seen a lot of shit, as an underground hero and all, but this…

"The bloodstains, most are insults and curses, all over the wall are a perfect match, while samples from the puddles in the pictures made the standard equipment go haywire, so we had to send them to a specialized analysis center. They're a ninety-six percent match with very high content of an explosive substance. The glass box showed the typical wear of shock-resistant glass hit with continuous explosions, and there were traces of that same nitroglycerin-like substance in several small spots of the room."

"Shit." *That's a succinct way to put it.* Shit indeed. Bakugou is *sixteen*.

"The blood and dried vomit stains in there ranged from a couple of days old for the biggest puddle to a little over two weeks old for the oldest marks," finishes Tsukauchi, unable to fully hide his squeamishness behind his professional attitude.

That's at least two weeks of … he doesn't even want to think about it. *Shit.*

Tsukauchi exhales. "Truth is, we have reason to believe he might have

escaped the day of the raid. The handcuff was covered in fresh bloody fingerprints and there were signs of a struggle in the hall of the basement, the wall of supplies was in disarray, and we found bits of bloody gauze and uncapped antibiotic balm."

"He tried to give himself first aid."

"Most likely. The DNA trail continues to the trapdoor of the basement, then upstairs, where he might have had a brief scuffle with an unfinished Nomu found electrocuted by a ripped up bundle of wires. Jeanist didn't report restraining it. Then there are handprints along the factory wall leading to an opening Mt.Lady punched into the building, and anything beyond that was washed away by the rain. No hospitals or local clinics have reported a patient matching his profile."

"So he made it out and either survived his injuries and is hiding, got caught again or, " Shouta's voice trembles, just a little, "he's dead in a ditch somewhere."

Tsukauchi's lips press into a grim line. "Essentially, yes. Since it's tied to the League the disappearance is under my jurisdiction now, but well, I can't promise much beyond bumping up the importance of the missing person case."

"Why? The boy—"

"Doesn't have the best reputation… I'm sorry Toshinori, but the police force is already stretched thin. Crime rates are on the rise. I'll be lucky if the higher-ups don't just pronounce the kid dead on the spot to save themselves the hassle and funds after surveying this evidence. No one should be able to survive that amount of blood loss. The fact that he seems to have made it upstairs is on its own a miracle."

Don't get your hopes up, is what Shouta hears.

"What about All For One? He's in custody, no?" All Might continues to press, looking paler and more frustrated by the minute.

"Yes." Tsukauchi sighs. "But he's resisting questioning."

"I'll pull it out of him myself," says All Might, "I've been meaning to see him since Kamino."

Tsukauchi is giving All Might a look that says exactly how fond (that is to say not at all) he is of this idea. Shouta clears his throat. They can sort this out between themselves. He excuses himself and strides

to the station bathroom with purposeful steps.

The drab room is empty and decently clean smelling for a public bathroom. He turns on the tap closest to the wall and splashes his face with the cool water. He drags his palm down said face, making a point not to look at his reflection and see something even more unkempt than usual. He finds himself craving the familiar security of his capture scarf around his neck. He feels exposed.

Are you going to be able to protect them, Eraserhead?

Had Dabi asked that knowing Shouta had already failed?

He slaps himself. This isn't like him. Bakugou's not his student anymore. He doesn't deal in illogical thoughts. He's expelled kids for far less. As far as he knew, he was sending Bakugou to be safe at home. He never could have predicted Bakugou would get kidnapped, much less that… this would happen to him. There's no one to blame but the villains who did it.

And yet, his class *had been* targeted several times. Bakugou had been front and center for all of that. It was logical to assume he'd be a target. A violent and powerful ex-student who already had the public's disapproval and, following his expulsion, a reason to hold a grudge? Everything about that screams prey to take advantage of for a villain. Especially if all the things he's been told about All For One are true.

It was obvious they should've kept a closer eye on him. But they— he hadn't. He'd underestimated just how far the League was willing to go and overestimated Bakugou's strength. And now Bakugou is, for all intents and purposes, dead.

It's not the first time for Shouta, having an ex-student pass away. Heroics is a dangerous profession. Things go wrong all the time. Be that accidents or villain attacks. But, he's never had any kids die on him, they've at the very least graduated. Never anyone younger than Shirakumo. He's never had a student… tortured.

Todoroki could have ended up like that too if the raid had happened any later — if the other kids hadn't been there to save him—

Shouta feels sick.

Midoriya stares at him, foot rested against the outside wall of his apartment. All Might worked his magic and managed to convince his

mother to allow problem child back at school it seems, and if Shouta notices the puffy red-rimmed eyes of the trio after their little talk, he doesn't mention them. He cannot deal with crying kids, much less crying adults.

He eyes Midoriya back, cursing all the gods he knows for making this kid so sharp. He's still injured and bandaged in some spots, but it's to be expected, considering he'd made his arms into confetti during the training camp. This kid, this kid had defeated an A-level villain on his own and managed to cook up a plan to save Todoroki not three days later.

Shouta doesn't know if he should offer praise or chastise him to next Friday. Midoriya is strong, his conviction to become a hero is even more so. But he needs to learn, that when heroes say they'll save everyone, that everyone should include himself. What's more, he tries too hard, and easily takes himself out of commission, and becomes a liability on the field.

The kid's arms are already riddled with terrible scars, and he's only been at school for a little over three months. If he continues like that, he won't even have arms by the end of first year. Shouta resists the urge to curl up and shut the world out and ignores all of this, filing it away for his scolding come the new term.

"What was it that you were wondering?" he asks, even though he knows, deep down what it's gonna be, and notes the way Midoriya stiffens.

Midoriya had surprised Shouta by opposing Bakugou's expulsion, even though he'd been the one who told on the boy in the first place.

Shouta had thought it was a case of Midoriya being too willing to forgive Bakugou due to his too-kind nature and his lack of care for himself, but Midoriya seemed to be firm on where he stood with Bakugou and appeared to hold very little in contempt. He's even expressed outright concern for Bakugou's mental health. It began to look more and more like Midoriya's admission of their pasts had been a slip up in a moment of heat rather than something born out of built-up resentment.

This worried Shouta a little because it isn't really normal to be so lax with the person who told you to commit suicide because you were, in his eyes, useless. He'd thought problem child was too used to getting stepped over and giving others too many chances due to how he'd

been treated all his life, so he recommended Hound Dog in the hopes of Midoriya realizing that he was allowed to feel angry and upset over people treating him unfairly.

The results had been a mixed bag at best. Midoriya *had* changed in a positive way during the break. After only a month of two therapy sessions a week, he was already much less skittish and closed off, seemed to have an easier time communicating, and his self-confidence had gotten a major boost.

But all that was underlined by this sense of exhaustion. By the uncomfortable shadow of Bakugou's (someone he'd known since he was a child) disappearance. It didn't help that Midoriya had been one of the two to discover and report it.

Midoriya's voice snaps him out of his thoughts.

"Todoroki said something… about the League. He said he'd told you." Of course he did, these kids will be the death of Shouta. "But that wasn't about Kacchan, right? It couldn't be—" he rambles under his breath. "Sensei, did— is there a new lead? Is Kacchan okay?"

Ah, the dreaded *Is he okay?* Are you considered okay when the last trace of your existence is a puddle of blood in a villain's basement? Midoriya's eyes shine that stubborn emerald, and Shouta is reminded of why kids like him are labeled problem children. Midoriya takes his silence to mean no and straight-up grabs Shouta's sleeve.

"Tell me he's okay! Tell me—" And god does the kid look scared. Shouta has never regretted his every life choice more.

"Midoriya, slow down." His mouth snaps shut and the grip on his sleeve loosens as he stares at Shouta, expectant. Shouta knows he can't lie, lest this kid break into the police station to get information himself. So, he goes for ripping off the bandaid. "Bakugou's DNA was found in a basement room below the Nomu factory in Kamino. He was kidnapped and held captive for at least two weeks."

Midoriya goes statue-still, and Shouta knows he's already doing some mental gymnastics to blame himself for this situation. "He's a-alive, right?" And if that isn't a loaded question.

"We don't know," Shouta replies honestly and hears the way Midoriya's breath hitches a little. "There was a substantial amount of his blood in the cell, but there was also a trail of it leading upstairs. We think he might have escaped the factory wounded and left on the

day of the raid to retrieve Todoroki, but the rain washed away any evidence outdoors. He lost too much blood and should be dead, but there's no body."

Midoriya leans into the wall, blinking hard to concentrate, muttering some stuff that sounds a lot like *Kacchan* and *Kamino* and *Cell* and *Blood* and *Wounded* and *I had a feeling this would go badly*. Shouta doesn't think he even realizes how he's frozen. His shoulders are shaking like he's on the verge of sobbing.

"He's not dead. He can't be— not dead—"

Shouta has never felt more out of his depth.

"Midoriya…" The kid stares at him with these wide eyes Shouta neither gets paid enough nor has the mental fortitude to deal with. He clears his throat to stop his own voice from cracking. "I can't promise you anything, but the investigation is still ongoing. All For One is in captivity now, we may manage to get some information out of him and clear up just what happened and why Bakugou was targeted."

"That part's obvious isn't it?" says Midoriya, and Shouta is struck by the hint of bitterness in his dazed voice. "The media has been saying all sorts of things, calling him a villain —since the Sports Festival. Sure I wanted to punch him a good few times, maybe have him realize he can be a complete idiot, but— but I never wanted to have strangers treat him worse than he ever treated me for my sake! I never wanted *this* Sensei!"

No one wanted this. "I know, and it's not your fault —" The kid makes this face like he doesn't believe him. "—No, it isn't and that's final. If you want someone to blame, the League is right there. Blame them. Blame All For One," *blame me*, "but don't be irrational and blame yourself. And I forbid you from even considering trying to go after him. The stunt you pulled with Todoroki may have ended in success, but you still overstepped about a hundred rules and regulations. Were it not for All Might's retirement, I would have expelled the entire class. You have a repeat offense and I *will* expel you—"

"—But I get updates on the investigation. I get the news." Midoriya doesn't miss a beat- "Please, Sensei." Though it's more demand than plea —leave it to this kid to remain polite on top of everything. He's being frayed at the ends.

"… fine, though know that the case has been classified." He sighs. "Bakugou will be found." *Alive or dead.*

Chapter End Notes

this was so hard to write. I'm always so scared of making their reactions too extreme and melodramatic that I end up making them too mild i think T-T. There's a high chance I'm going to come back here to re-edit parts of this, but I've been stressing over this chapter for too long so fuck it.

Chapter 7: Limbo

Chapter Summary

recovery road is rocky

Chapter Notes

I'm highly sleep-deprived.

My classes have started up again *sighs* so I probably won't have as much time to stay on top of the update schedule. I'll still try my best to do weekly, but we might go biweekly too depending on how busy I am. Classes kick my ass lmao.

This chapter was hard, just like any chapter really. A lot of things may not make sense yet, a lot of things may seem like they're going unanswered, but I promise, all will be addressed so I'm gonna ask everyone to be patient. Feel free to share guesses and questions in the comments as always though.

It's a pretty heavy chapter too. !!!!! Trigger warning for a lot of bad thoughts, especially food-related, and a suicide attempt.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

06.09.2XXX

Soft light is filtering onto his face when Katsuki wakes up. It's a nice light, the type of early morning light he used to love going hiking under. The type of light that would never make it into the basement. Everything hurts in a detached way. He's sitting on something soft, he's wearing soft stuff too, and he's pretty sure his head is resting against a pillow. Holy fuck. Is this heaven?

He goes to sigh in relief, and only then does he notice he *can't*. That's a little… okay. That's— He feels himself twitch at the sensation of air in his lungs despite not having taken a breath. It feels like there's a snake in his trachea. He tries to peel his eyes open more than a few millimeters to actually get a look at what's going on and it's so *hard*. Ghost fingers push down on his eyelids as he feels another breath come from *somewhere*. He hears the distant sound of a sped-up beep.

turning a bit red

he's not ready … without a mask

He doesn't want to breathe and something keeps doing it for him at the wrong pace and it feels worse than choking. Katsuki's eyes snap open as the beep picks up a scary fast rhythm, and he's aware of a lot of things. The tubes everywhere, and the weight of bandages on his legs and arms, and the uncomfortable feel of ECG stickers all over his torso, and the pinch of the monitor over his finger—

He's put on the bed, then attached to about twenty machines that appear to be doing a lot but are in fact doing exactly nothing . Then, to be extra cruel, the doctor shuts Katsuki's eyes and he can't blink them open again.

It's this again. Not this again. He's scared to blink, staring instead at the warm wood ceiling. Not metal. No reflection. Where *is* he? Did he get moved? This place is too nice. Or at least the ceiling is. The cool tubes on either side of his face make him want to itch. The machine forces him to inhale again. He moves his eyes around but sees only ceiling. Another breath. How does he get this thing to stop?

"—awake?"

There's a hand on his arm.

disgusting pressure on his face and his eyelids are being forced open, limbs being moved into a different position, like he's nothing more than a puppet on strings

The beeping skyrockets, ringing in Katsuki's ears like an alarm. His arm jerks with strength he didn't know he had and something rips. The beep goes continuous then, and when he feels a hand on his arm again, he freezes, brain screaming to get away, and passes out.

07.09.2XXX

He opens his eyes again, and it's miles better than the last time. The tubes are gone, replaced by an oxygen mask. Not that he likes the mask much better, but at least there's nothing inside his airways anymore. Small mercies. If this is heaven, it fucking sucks.

Why would I end up in heaven anyway? Stupid.

He ignores every scream of protest from every joint and shifts himself upward. His abdomen feels like it's being ripped apart with every twitch of movement. Okay. It's okay. Let's do a little evaluation.

His legs and arms are bandaged to next Saturday, and there's still a monitor attached to his finger and an IV line in the crook of his elbow. He's on a bed. A hospital bed to be exact. But the rest of the room doesn't look like a hospital. Apart from the small cart of supplies in the corner (even that decorated with two little cacti) and well, the bed, the rest of the room is the opposite of hospital. It's wooden and illuminated by defused light from the screen windows of one side. It doesn't smell like antiseptic or bleach or rubbing alcohol.

Katsuki's definitely been moved, and either this place is somehow inescapable, or the League made a major mistake leaving him untied. He takes the oxygen mask off and starts to move his legs off the bed when the other screen, not the one with light behind it, begins to slide open.

"This time are you awake?" He freezes, staring at this granny he does not recall being part of the League. First of all, who the fuck? An old-ass deranged doctor and now an old-ass grandma. Did All For One hire a whole nursing home? They're going hard with the role-play. Must be a new torture method. Second of all, why the fuck is she surrounded by goop? Neon yellow floating goop with blood-red geometric shapes twisting and turning inside it. Her quirk?

He keeps his mouth shut. She squints at him.

"Put the oxygen mask back on. Your saturation is low." He stares. She stares back. *What.*

"I took the liberty of getting rid of the ventilator and catheter while you were asleep."*Catheter?!* "Didn't think you would appreciate being awake for that."

She thought right, but that doesn't make it any less embarrassing. Holy shit. How many things were *in* him and he didn't even feel them? How many things did *the doctor* do to him when he was sleeping?

"Why?" It comes out so scratchy. Katsuki doesn't even recognize his own voice. He needs water.

"Patients of your temperament tend to be self-conscious—"

"No. Why—" He gestures around the room, words getting caught in his throat. "—here?"

"Why are you here?" He nods. "You called me yourself. I found you injured in a phone booth outside of Kamino and took care of it."

“Why?!” He’s frustrated at his memory’s lack of cooperation. Last he remembers, he was still chained to that metal cell.

“I suppose it wouldn’t be strange for you to have brain damage… Remember our first meeting in Musutafu? You saved me from a purse snatcher, and I gave you a card for my shop. Told you to call if you ever got yourself stuck since I was in your debt. You did.”

Right, the alley. That feels like it was *years* ago. Memories snap into place bit by bit, thousands of snapshots forming a film reel in his head. He remembers the encounter with All For One, the stab wound, running away, the phone booth… He made it out. This— this isn’t the League.

But it’s still some sort of doctor. It might as well scream unsafe. He continues trying to get up. His limbs shake with powerlessness.

“Oh no, sit back down and put the oxygen mask on,” orders the granny. He ignores her. “You won’t be able to get up.”

Case in point, the moment Katsuki tries to push himself forward he collapses back in a limp heap. He stares at the ceiling and finds himself stuck, literally too weak to move.

“Told you.” He hears the granny shuffle closer and put a hand on his arm to help steady him. He flinches.

“Don’t—” Another flinch. “—touch me.”

Her weird eyes soften with some semblance of pity and he wants to curl up and die. “It will only take twenty seconds, I’m sure you don’t want to be stuck in that spot.” He doesn’t, so he lets her move him, not quite there mentally. Can’t even fucking sit up on his own. Fucking useless.

“—boy?”

“Huh?” he says dumbly, eyes clearing and zeroing in on the neon goop around the hag. She snaps her fingers in front of him, annoyed at his lack of attention.

“What happened to you?”

I always knew you were going to fuck it up

His first urge is to say nothing. But it’s not nothing. If it was nothing

he wouldn't need to be coddled like a baby. "Some shit."

"*Some*? A quarter of your ribs cracked, right thumb broken with nerves severed, a hole the size of a pipe a mere centimeters shy of your stomach. That's not even counting the burns on top of unhealed burns and enough cuts on your legs to put a cutting board to shame. That's 'some'?!" she says it remarkably calm while still somehow betraying a stifling sense of urgency. "In all my forty years as a doctor I have never seen anyone with such a huge cocktail of drugs in their bloodstream. Do you have any idea how many favors I had to call to get you healed?"

Wow, okay. That makes him feel… an indescribable level of bad. So he stares at his bandaged right hand. Granny notices.

"It might have been saved had we gone to an actual hospital, but you woke up in a fit midway through my initial first aid and when I told you I was planning to take you, you panicked and tried to attack me."

A mix of anger and sticky guilt blooms in his chest. He called this random lady he met once at god knows what time of night and showed up half dead. He became a burden and the fact that she owed him a debt doesn't comfort him. He shouldn't be here. He shouldn't be confined to a bed due to his own inability to get up, shouldn't be stuck with weak bones and a non-functional hand. He's supposed to be strong, damn it. He shouldn't need help. He doesn't deserve it.

The woman moves closer to check on his IV and he jerks away from her. "I just put that in. I need to check it's still good. Wouldn't want the needle to break off inside your vein." He flinches again. Fuck.

"Fuck off. I don't need to be coddled."

"No, what you need is a hospital." He blanches. "But you're too stubborn and hard-headed to accept that, so you'll have to take my help."

Katsuki bristles at the word, but the protest won't come out.

"You're staying here for at least another two weeks. I intend to pay my debts in full, and if I let you go now, you wouldn't make it to the front door. You'd collapse and end up starving in some alley and all my work would be for naught."

"I'm not weak," he mumbles and it sounds pathetic even to him, especially to him.

“That’s not how it works.” The old lady sighs like Katsuki’s existence is the sole perpetrator of everything bothersome in the world. “I’ve seen dozens of your type so open your ears boy. You *died*. Your heart stopped. I needed to resuscitate you. Refusing medical attention when you’re in obvious need of it doesn’t make you strong, it makes you stupid. Needing help after getting hurt isn’t weakness.”

But allowing myself to get hurt in the first place is.

He snaps his mouth shut because some part of her *is* right, and Katsuki tries really hard to ignore the intense need to crawl out of his own skin as she checks on the IV. When she’s done, she turns her attention to the heart-rate machine beeping periodically at his bedside. She frowns. “Does your quirk lower your BPM? Or do you have some other health condition?”

His quirk! It hadn’t been working that day with All For One. Katsuki tries to will sweat onto his palms, shifts the tendon to ignite it. Nothing. His palm is dry. His quirk is still gone. The heart rate monitor spikes, and it’s only because healer hag is in the room and she’s already seen him being enough of a loser that he doesn’t let himself freak out. He’s so fucked.

“My quirk is sweating an explosive substance, it’s kind of like nitroglycerin, so I have some of that everywhere, in my bloodstream too, and it does lower my heart rate, but usually, my body compensates with extra adrenaline.” He’s breathless by the end. Even speaking long sentences is a struggle. He still needs water.

Healer hag considers this and nods. “There were high traces of both of those in your bloodstream, but the adrenaline isn’t doing its job—”

One of those strange squares floats by the bedside, surrounded by liquid jelly-like neon yellow. She doesn’t seem able to see it, and when Katsuki gives into temptation and discreetly sticks out a pinky to touch it at the edge, it phases straight through, like he’s touching a hologram.

“—must be something else. Perhaps a delayed effect of all those drugs. Boy? Are you listening?”

“Hmm, yeah,” he mumbles, still watching the floating stuff. He’s the only one who sees it, and it isn’t there at all in the physical sense. He thinks about telling healer hag, but how would he explain? ‘I see floating bullshit’ doesn’t sound trustworthy or *sane*, and it’ll either get him kicked out or confined to this bed for eternity. He’s not sure

which choice he'd prefer.

Don't be a burden

Her eyes narrow in suspicion, but she lets it drop, mistaking his confusion for drowsiness.

"Anyway, I'll bring you some ice chips. I doubt you'll be able to keep down anything."

As she prepares to hobble away, Katsuki remembers to ask: "Wait. You didn't tell me where we are or who you were."

"Iki Koharu, call me whatever you like." Healer hag it is then. "I'm a traveling doctor. This is one of the patient rooms in my shop."

What even is a traveling doctor and why is Katsuki a magnet for weird medical professionals?

The hag hasn't left yet, instead, she's staring at him expectantly like she wants Katsuki to introduce himself too. It's dumb because he's ninety percent sure she already knows who he is; his appearance is quite distinct and his face had been plastered all over the internet a little while ago. But what's dumber is that he hesitates, for a moment questioning who he's supposed to be with a literal big fat nothing to his name, not even a quirk.

"Katsuki," he says finally, not bothering with the surname.

"Alright then, Katsuki." She coughs, covering her mouth with a withered hand. "You wait right there while I fix something to drink. And enough moving around, this old lady can only handle so much commotion."

10.09.2XXX

That bone-deep exhaustion he felt after waking up never really leaves, but it does get better every day, apparently a normal happening for people healed with that Ambrosia shit. That means he can move on his own by the third day, which saves him from the mortifying ordeal of needing help to go to the bathroom.

Needing full-on crutches to move around is not fun. But he'd been in a coma for over ten days on top of that month of… shit so he's lucky he's even got a chance of making a full recovery, nevermind this fast. Healer hag isn't a doctor for nothing.

And so he walks to the bathroom, and it's a damn toilet, it should not feel this impactful, but the hole for pissing in had been one of the worst parts of that stupid cell. Almost worse than the actual sessions. It made him feel like an animal. Sure his parents hadn't been around a lot, but growing up with people in the beauty industry very attentive to appearance, he was something of a hygiene freak himself. Not that any of that had mattered in *there*. He hadn't had access to *anything*. Barely enough water to *drink* let alone wash himself with.

He stares at the fucking bathroom and feels his eyes water, fucking hell. He will not start crying because of a clean toilet. He gets to wash his face and brush his teeth after he's done too (making a point not to look at himself in the mirror) and he feels cleaner than he's felt in years, which the logical part of him knows isn't true, he's not allowed to take a shower yet. It sure feels that way though.

He's pathetic.

11.09.2XXX

"What's that?" He scowls.

"Food," answers healer hag.

"That's goop, not food."

"It's formula."

"For babies."

Her look betrays "are you really arguing about this" and he flushes because he doesn't exactly feel like explaining why he'll probably hate everything with a texture close to porridge for the rest of eternity.

"Don't be a baby and eat. You're underweight."

Tends to happen when you've thrown away the only food you've gotten for the last month. He grabs the bowl anyway and makes a show of eating a spoonful in front of her. Satisfied, she nods and disappears into the hall, shutting the screen behind her.

Once she's gone, Katsuki stares at the food. He knows he *should* eat. He has lost a lot of weight, and the small amount of muscle definition still there is only there because fat is even sparser. He does need to eat. And the taste is not the same. This formula actually has a flavor. It's not that much in amount either. He'd been malnourished so long

there's refeeding syndrome to worry about, so they're starting off small. Healer hag has had about a billion chances to poison or drug him or murder him and hasn't yet, so it's doubtful she'd start now (right?). And the alternative is a feeding tube.

He's not so much of a snowflake that he can't even *eat*. So he tries again, too fast, because he gets nauseous in minutes. The texture. He can't stomach it.

It takes much more effort than he'd like to admit to get to the bathroom in time to puke.

Explosion is gone. At least the exploding part of it is. He holds his finger over the candle and feels nothing but the soft tickle of heat. Maybe it's the calluses? He thinks about trying again on another, less rough spot, but there's no unbandaged space on him. He doesn't want healer hag to find out about this since it would entail a shit ton of explanations.

Ambrosia is apparently a type of healing quirk produced liquid from someone part of healer hag's family. Katsuki has the impression it's blood. Healer hag seemed very unhappy when she'd mentioned her family so he hadn't pried for details, but whatever the stuff was it was strong as hell. It dialed down every other bodily function of the person who took it to bare survival minimum and dedicated all the body's 'resources' to injury repair.

Katsuki hadn't been kidding about having the best burnt arm in the world, but through that quirk, his burns had been reduced from third-degree to second (which meant no grafts), and he hadn't lost any organs from the hole in his abdomen. It was nothing short of a miracle, and Katsuki imagines whoever in healer hag's family had that quirk was having a rough time of it. People like the doctor would love to sink their teeth into healing blood.

But that miracle means he can't burn his arm off again for the sake of testing. He's not ungrateful, and the injury is not fully healed either, it still needs bandage changes and antibiotic ointment every day, on top of hurting like hell. At least there are no bubbles or weird discharge. He'd had enough blisters in the basement where he hadn't had anything to fix them with.

He watches the flame dance under his palm, doing absolutely nothing to him. He hadn't been planning to live at all, yet here he is, *damaged*. He regrets ever having called.

With a terrifying clarity, he concludes he doesn't care, about his quirk. He thought he would but he doesn't. Anyone who tries a tiny bit can tell he's wrong in the head and prime villain material, the only thing his quirk had ever done was mask that behind its flashiness and feed his delusions. How long until she realizes too?

"What are you laughing about?" calls Healer hag from the shop's main room and Katsuki freezes in spite of himself. He's guarded around her. The way she asks for shit is too kind. He's not used to that. It reminds him uncomfortably of his dad (of *Inko*, but that's a can of worms he's not willing to open), memories of who were often drowned out by how loud and *there* his mom was by comparison. Or well, is. He wonders if they're doing okay. Better without him there to mess everything up.

I've lost it.

It's funny how it applies to everything.

13.09.2XXX

Healer hag's house is like a hybrid between a house and a clinic. The main area is the front, the medicine shop, lined with rows of remedy drawers and a few modern machines. It's not unlike a pharmacy. Healer hag claims to be a quirk doctor on top of regular doctor crap, which, ignoring his own negative experiences, Katsuki is curious about.

He's not allowed in the shop's main room while healer hag is at work, which is most of the day. That is unless he's willing to wear a mask to cover his face out there like she does. He's told this shop, the Sun Shop, named after the bright yellow midget size door up front, is quite popular, and a bit of an urban legend. She'll serve pretty much everyone short of serious criminals and at fair prices, which, questionable legality aside, explains why the shop is popular. Healer hag is a good doctor. He'd know.

Since he's not interested in playing assistant upfront, he spends most of the day in the back, house part of the building. which is a cozy maze of nooks and crannies and small rooms. There are the living room and the kitchen and Koharu's office and bedroom he's not allowed inside, then an extra guest room and two tiny rooms with hospital beds and equipment meant to function as a makeshift clinic when people like him come knocking. Very different from his old house and *very* different from the cell.

It's okay. It's nice. It helps that he can use the house to practice walking when no one is looking to see him fail miserably.

That's in essence what he does in his spare time. Practice walking and practice writing. Because he can't do that either thanks to the useless hunk of meat that is his right thumb. It's not paralyzed, but it may as well be, and he's just opted to learn how to write with his left instead of bothering with a nerve-severed thumb. He feels off, everything is off. He's not *there*, most of the time.

He swipes a strip of dust from the blade of the fan in the corner of the hall.

The house is pretty well-kept for being maintained by a single person. He can pitch in with the chores once he regains a bit more of his mobility. At least cleaning is one thing he's good at.

15.09.2XXX

"— *new hero rankings, mid-year predictions!"* Oh, it's these guys again. They're wearing the exact same outfits. Katsuki hisses as Koharu replaces the bandages on his arms for today. Three more days and they'll be gone for good. He can do that.

"*Houyori-san, this year's billboard will be a show!"* says the lanky guy. Koharu scowls at the screen. Looks like she's regretting doing the bandage change in the living room instead of Katsuki's room. The TV is rarely on and Katsuki has been avoiding it, or any contact with the media. Looks like he and healer hag agree on this.

"*Edgeshot's arrests have shot way up, and with Jeanist out of commission, it's possible we might see a placement switch. I expect all the heroes who were part of Kamino to get bumped up as well.*" Mt.lady and Best Jeanist *had* been there. Makes sense there's be more too.

I had you kill Todoroki Shouto right in front of his father, your mentor, and a handful of your old classmates

He blinks.

"Treating human lives like numbers on a billboard…" mutters Koharu, tightening the bandage around his left arm with a little more force than necessary. Katsuki suppresses his wince.

"*With All Might's retirement*—" Okay pause. All Might's what?

“All Might’s what?” he asks out loud.

“Retirement,” answers Koharu as she puts her tools away. “That fight at Kamino took a lot out of him.” And as if to hammer in the point, All Might pops up on screen right then. Or who he assumes is All Might. Because it’s a skeleton. A bloodied emaciated skeleton man. His heart drops.

you’re here because you’d make a great story, and all of this is the set-up for the opening act.

Icy Hot’s kidnapping, the destruction of an entire ward, the death of All Might. It was for him. It was to set the stage for him. It was his fault.

His fault.

Fuck.

He’s floating again. Healer hag might be saying something, but he can’t hear her very well. It’s like he’s submerged underwater.

The death of a great hero, he’d done it in the end. He’d had his villain debut. All this would’ve never happened had he fought back more against All For One in that basement, had he tried harder to escape from the factory and warn everyone, had he never gotten caught in the first place, had he never been expelled. *Fuck*. It all snowballs.

I always knew you were going to fuck it up

All Might looked like *that* and he’d still fought. Still won. What excuse did Katsuki have? None. He had nothing but his own incompetence to blame.

Winners don’t make excuses.

He’s never been a winner. Whatever image of himself he used to have, it’s been warped and twisted to high-heavens. And now there’s nothing left. He’d thought he’d been doing ok. He’d known he was pretending.

He makes it to the bathroom at miracle speed, shutting the door behind him and retching nothing into the sink. He got food in the morning but threw it away. Couldn’t eat it. He doesn’t remember the last time he ate.

Katsuki walks out of the bathroom and into the room he's been using, stumbling every other step. What does he do? How does he fix his shit? He's got to fix his shit. But there's no way to fix it. He ruined Deku and he ruined his parents and he ruined All Might. He never should have made that phone call.

Maybe he can make up for it now?

He rummages through the cart of supplies in the corner. It's easy enough to find a scalpel.

He could die?

He presses the blade to the exposed part of his wrist and it's a lot harder than expected. It hurts and he could have sworn breaking his thumb had been easier. This is so inefficient. He presses hard but all that comes out is not big enough beads of orange-red. The doctor used to cut him all the time. This should be easy. The corners of his vision darken and blur.

"Stop that!" He flinches. *Fuck*. He fucked up again. He's not gonna get water after this.

"I'm sorry," he says. He's not sure to who. He lets go of the scalpel and it stays there. Okay. Huh. "I'm sorry," he says again.

"…It's alright, stand up and sit on the bed so I can check how bad this is," coaxes the voice, gentler this time. He doesn't move. "… or not. Okay, I'll check here. Hold out your arm." That he does. He hears an inhale.

"That's going to need stitches when I take the scalpel out. You need the hospital Katsuki."

"No." He jerks his arms away and doesn't even register the pain of the knife shifting. "No hospital," he repeats firmly.

"You'll die without stitches."

"That's fine."

"It's not and I don't have anesthesia in the shop right now. I can't do your stitches lucid."

He stares at nothing.

"Katsuki?"

“I don’t need stitches.”

“You do. I’m not just going to let you die.”

“Why not?”

“You’re my patient.”

“I’m a villain.”

“Wouldn’t be the first. Besides, you aren’t. You’re a good kid.” He scoffs.

“You can’t honestly believe that—” They’ve both been pretending pretty well that she doesn’t know exactly *which* Katsuki he is, but he knows she knows, everyone knows. “—so fucking leave it.”

“Honey, I’m not going to leave you running around with a scalpel in your wrist.”

“Why not?”

“I can think of many different reasons!”

“It doesn’t hurt anyway. Didn’t do it right.”

“You’re bleeding all over the floor and it doesn’t hurt?!” The voice is skeptical. He shakes his head in confirmation.

“Can’t feel it.” He yanks the scalpel out and it clatters to the ground. Katsuki stares at it, ignoring the scandalized gasp. “Can’t feel that either.”

“Why would you do that?!” asks the voice again and this time he looks up to face the source. All he can see is the neon yellow goop. It shifts and he feels a pressure on his wrist. Bandages. He’s so tired.

“Do whatever you want,” he says, and lets himself drift.

“What was that?!”

She’s short as hell, Katsuki thinks in a vain effort to distract himself from the deep shit he’s seeped himself into this time. *Now* he’s feeling the stab, he’s very much feeling it and it does not feel pleasant. The bandages on his wrist itch and they had to redo the ones on his arm to make room for a blood transfusion needle.

“You have spare blood bags lying around but no anesthetic?”

Her face is grim, mouth set in a thin line. She’s a lot like Recovery Girl. Katsuki never landed himself in the infirmary much, but that old lady sure had her ways to make you feel like a stupid moron. Could be a common trait of old ladies. Katsuki’s own grandparents had passed away when he was too young to confirm that.

“Please answer the question.”

“No.”

“You’re under my roof.” *channeling my actual hag right there huh.*

“I can get out if you want.” He goes to stand up but she pushes him down with the god-forsaken cane, still glaring.

“It’s not the time for sass. Answer me so I can help you.”

Anger flares in his chest in a way it hasn’t in a while. In that explosive way he can’t control, that starts from his heart and extends to his fingertips, spilling like water from an overfilled cup, “*Help me*… what, am I your fucking pet project?!“ That was too loud. It’s making *him* want to recoil. But she seems unperturbed.

“For the last time. You. Are. My. Patient. I am a doctor. Doctor heals patient. Is people caring about other people such a foreign concept for you?”

Yes.

Would that be too pathetic to say?

He crosses his arms and glares instead, aware he’s acting like a petulant child. She stares back sadly.

“For god’s sake, boy, *please*. You’ve got me seriously worried here.”

How can she be worried about someone she's interacted with for less than a week? She’s like fucking Deku, isn’t she? Fuck. On the other hand, this is part of the debt. Katsuki knows he’d be annoyed if someone kept trying to die and refused to communicate while he was trying to repay his debts. He feels the tips of his ears flush, he’s got enough self-awareness by now to recognize when he’s being a dick.

“A thing happened,” he relents.

“It was not a *thing*. You were crying, tried to commit suicide—” He flinches. “—then disassociated so badly you barely felt me *performing surgery* on you with minimal anesthetic. You need to tell me what happened to you because all the current clues point toward t—”

She’ll think I’m damaged.

“Nothing! They point towards nothing! It’s none of your fucking business.”

“That’s not what you said earlier—”

“I don’t care what I said earlier!” He finds himself breathing hard. Inhales. Tries to calm down. “It was nothing, okay? I’m fine. Everything’s fine. The sui— I freaked out earlier. That’s it. Won’t happen again. I promise. So drop it.”

She frowns at him, conflicted. “I can’t—”

“Please,” he adds, pride be damned, and she finally cracks, sighing hard.

“Alright, but you *need* more help Katsuki. You need the hospital and a psychologist and probably some therapy. I can’t give you that if you don’t let me. I can’t leave you lying around when you’re mentally unstable.”

“I’m not.”

Worst lie he’s ever told. He feels exhausted and slumps backward. *Ungrateful fuck.* He’s got a fucking bed and everything and he’s still causing problems. Healer hag frowns again (he sure is good at making people do that) then eyes him critically.

“Have you been eating?” Well, he’s grateful for the change of topic even if it’s not to a very nice topic. He doesn’t answer, too much of a fucking pussy to admit he can’t even stomach baby food.

“Because you don’t look any better. If anything, you look thinner.”

He stares at his wrist. The cut itches.

“I’m not going to get mad at you whatever you answer.” What is he, a fucking baby?

“No,” he mutters. “I— uh— I can’t do porridge texture shit.” He expects a scoff and dismissal. Instead, he gets a nod.

“Well, you should’ve said that! Are soups okay?”

“They’re whatever. Sure.”

“I’ll make you some.” The tone betrays an intention to continue the conversation from earlier, but it seems like she’s taking pity on him and backing off for now. “You’re a tough kid,” she says, sliding the door open. “Let people in once in a while.”

Chapter End Notes

Was really wondering if I fell too hard into the bleak for this one, but I wanted it to feel like Katsuki's near rock bottom. He's as purposeless as in chapter one, and add all the shit that happened since then and well, it's not a fun mix.

Was the OC fine? She's based on my own grandmother lmao. Probably not what some of you expected but we'll learn more about her later. Hope she felt as unobtrusive as possible.

Not my best chapter but eh. I always sit on these for too long anyway.

Chapter 8: Limbo part two: how to get unstuck

Chapter Summary

Katsuki's recovery starts going better and someone is on to him.

(tw// for lots of weight discussions and general image issues)

Chapter Notes

Early update this time because not going to lie, I've been itching to keep progressing with the story and, as much as I enjoy these slower chapters, I (and i think a lot of readers) am also really looking forward to what I've got planned for part two of this (which will start with chapter 12). So I figured since I have the motivation there's no need to hold back on posts.

I hope the progression in Katsuki's mentality makes sense here, and I've probably stretched it with Koharu's quirk (it's a little too specific to be a real quirk methinks but I'll let the audience judge) though I'm happy to answer any questions you may have about it.

I don't live in Japan so I apologize in advance if the nature described in this chapter isn't present in Japan or the climate for the seasons is a bit wrong. I tried to do research but I can't promise 100% accuracy so I request a little suspension of disbelief.

Hope this chapter is ok and thank you so so so much for the overwhelming support for healer hag lol I'm happy people like her.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

20.09.2XXX

He sinks into the tub, sighing. A few bubbles of foam pop.

His prior relationship with water could be described as apathetic at best. Musutafu as a town had plenty of natural resources, including rivers and creeks and beaches. Some of his earliest memories, the nicer ones, featured that type of landscape. It’s normal, familiar, not all that noteworthy. But now that he’s intimately acquainted with

what it feels like to drown, there's this sense of tension there too (the uncomfortable knowledge that everything in this room could be a weapon, including the water). The pros outweigh the cons though, and he's been waiting for the chance to have a bath for *so* long.

The burns on his arms healed for good, and not the shoddy quirked 'healing' the doctor used to do to keep him alive. They're fully-scarred over now. A little pink and a little sensitive, but he doesn't need bandages or bandage changes anymore. Same for all the cuts on his legs, which healed over nicely (and by that he means into a big grid of angry dark reds) days ago. The big spear hole meanwhile was the main thing the Ambrosia dealt with, so it was the first to heal in full. Now it's a star shaped mark the size of a fingerless palm to match the polkadot poker scars and form a solar system of ugly.

The only thing left is the stab wound on his wrist. Once that's closed up he gets to leave. He's not sure how he feels about that.

The water is warm, pleasant against his skin. He used to be all about rushed showers, never had time when he was a functioning human member of society with goals and responsibilities. But he can learn to appreciate baths, he thinks. It's not because he still has trouble standing for prolonged periods of time. Definitely not.

And the bubbles? Well, it was a real mystery how the bubble-wash fell in the tub, but he couldn't waste that much water now could he?

He leans his head back and closes his eyes.

-happy birthday to you!" He blew the candles, smiling hard. Mom ruffled his hair and he pretended not to like it.

"Happy birthday Kacchan!" said baby-Deku, running into him in what must've been a clumsy attempt to hug. Deku was so touchy. He was wearing this ridiculous yellow onesie. Mom wouldn't allow him outside the house dead with that on. Auntie Inko was so nice.

"Yeah, yeah." He couldn't find it in himself to reply with malice. Instead, he peeled Deku off and sat back down, fidgeting in impatience. His dad returned to the room soon, holding the cake knife.

"Let me do it myself!" Katsuki heard his kid self-say, brimming with confidence.

"Whoa, you can use a knife Katsuki?" admired an extra whose name he doesn't remember.

“Of course I can!”

In truth, his dad sat next to him to help him along. There were four candles on his cake. Too young to handle sharp stuff with quite that much agency.

They were gonna make the first cut when they heard a sniffle. It was Deku. There were tears in his eyes. “Don’t cut All Might!” he’d said. He meant the cake. Katsuki’s cake was All Might-themed and covered in fondant to form the image of the hero. Back then, in spite of the first growing glimmers of intelligence Katsuki would later grow to fear, the smallest stuff could set Deku off.

Katsuki had stared like Deku was stupid, while his dad floundered, looking back and forth for where the moms had disappeared to. Little crying kids weren’t his element, even less so back then.

Katsuki felt himself reach out an arm to drag Deku next to him, then he’d peeled up the layers of fondant with his fingers. “Katsuki—” scolded dad, confused by what he’d been doing. That is until he saw the uncovered cake, which now, with the All Might image gone, looked like a regular cake.

“There, nerd.”

Deku had stared at him like he’d just invented astrophysics. God, that stupid idiot. It was a cake.

Then again, he’d been three years old.

“You’re so cool Kacchan!” he’d mumbled, and Katsuki’s cheeks flushed. He stuck a finger in the icing of the slice dad had put on his plate and smeared it on Deku’s face, snickering. “Hey!” whined Deku, wiping the corners of his eyes and straight-up stealing a forkful of cake from Katsuki’s slice. Their moms had come back before things could escalate.

“On your next birthday, you should get the cake with the figure on top. So you don’t have to cut All Might.”

“Or I could eat All Might,” he’d said, grabbing a piece of the fondant from the table and sticking it into his mouth.

His parents were busy on his birthday the following year, and every year after that.

Once his fingers have turned wrinkly and the water lukewarm he gets out, using the towel from the little caddy of toiletries Koharu left him to dry himself off and slipping into his clothes. The ones from the

basement were either destroyed or too bloody to use, so he's been given these new pajamas. They're a little big for him —even if he has gained a tiny amount of weight since he started eating, he has to roll them up at the cuffs. But he's not about to complain. Doesn't think he could handle anything super restrictive either.

He uses the comb to brush out the knots in his wet hair before drying it with a towel and repeating the brushing again. It's too long, he'll have to give it a makeshift cut sometime before he leaves. It's paler as well, streaked with white. Every part of him is paler really, including his skin and eyes. It's like he's been washed out.

Not sitting too long to contemplate that, he finishes up and grabs all the laundry from the washing machine. He's already extended his stay due to the scalpel stunt, doing a couple of chores is bare minimum. It took a lot of push and pull for healer hag to allow it (yes, the fact that he needs permission to hang up laundry is very much a stab at his ego, but said ego is also so deflated you could rip a hole in it and there'd be no air to lose so…) but she'd relented when he'd argued it would be productive exercise to regain his mobility.

He hops over the junk in the hallway, pail of clothes in hand.

It's Monday, so the shop is closed. Koharu is sitting at the living room table, pretending to read a book while the fan blows cool air on her face (It doesn't blow the neon goop away, he notes). It's hot for mid-September. His footsteps draw her attention.

"Where do ya hang this shit?"

"Outside," she says, motioning to the wall behind her. Only now does Katsuki realize it's a sliding panel like the one in the room he sleeps in. Come to think of it, there are very few windows in the house. The screens let in enough light to hide that fact.

He walks over to the wall and, resting the clothes against the tatami, hooks his fingers into the groove of the screen and slides it open.

He's met with… humid September air and the scent of cypress? Beyond the overhang and small walkway is a full-on garden, and beyond the wall after that is what looks like a forest. Not a small one either. No other buildings in sight. A soft breeze faintly smelling of saltwater makes the chimes and ornaments adorning the roof beam jingle. The garden ground is a neat, compacted grass —a lawn and the clothesline is strung on two poles embedded in the dirt, in the direct line of sight of the midday sun. At the very corner sits a glass

greenhouse, the trees projecting on it spotted shadows.

He'd known they were somewhere exposed and remote, considering the rain was pretty audible, but he'd been expecting some sort of busy suburb. Not *this*. Where *is* this place?

A soft thing hits the back of his head, and he turns in time to catch the crumpled up hat healer hag threw at him.

"You'll get sunburnt," she provides, as if that explains why they're suddenly in the middle of the wilderness.

"I thought you said the shop was in Osaka the city," he asks, pointing to the open area outside.

She coughs. "It is."

"Ya sure? 'Cuz this looks like the goddamn boonies to me." Not that Katsuki is all that familiar with Osaka, but he doubts Koharu found a plot of land this big in an area of Osaka busy enough to facilitate business. If she did she must be *loaded*. "How are you getting customers in the middle of nowhere?!"

"Hmm, I suppose it would be better to say *the customers* are coming from Osaka."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

She places down her book and peers at him through her glasses. "Do you not know how the shop moves?"

He feels like a moron all of a sudden. Is he supposed to know that? She *had* said she was a moving doctor, Katsuki had just never really stopped to consider the logistics of that. "No," he croaks. He doesn't like not knowing things.

"I use my quirk to move the shop, or well, the door to the shop. I can use my blood to connect an entry to an exit by drawing borders around them. The door to the shop that's in Osaka right now connects to the front door in the main room—" She must've noticed him gaping a little. "Oh dear, never mind, let me give you an example."

She signals for him to come inside and produces that purse she'd been holding in the alley. It's glowing a neon yellow. "Open up that cupboard," she instructs, pointing to a cubby under the main bookshelf of the living room. It comes free with more than a little

friction. There's so much stuff in there, portable umbrellas, tissues, cookie tins, glasses, you name it.

"Watch," she says, before the hand, she sticks into her purse materializes *inside* of the cubby. What. The *fuck*. He watches the arm grab a cookie tin, then he turns around to face her, and that same cookie tin is coming out of her purse. He'd been wondering how that thing fit in such a tiny purse. Turns out it didn't. Turns out the purse is connected to an entire damn cupboard. This is some Ghibli movie bullshit.

She hands him the purse, urging him to try. Its opening is covered in a thin neon film. He pokes a finger inside. The film doesn't feel like anything. It's similar to the goop around Koharu herself, hologram-like.

Filing that information away for later, he puts more of his hand inside the purse and watches it show up inside the cubby. That is seriously freaky. He closes his hand around a pair of glasses and grabs them. Sure enough, when he drags his hand out of the purse it's still clutching the glasses. And when he lets go and drops them back inside, they clatter on top of everything else piled in the cubby.

"The hem of the purse is the 'entryway', and an opening on the top side of that cubby is the 'exit'. When you put your hand in the purse, instead of it ending up in the actual inside of the purse, it ends up inside that cubby, because I used my blood to connect them."

"It's like a warp gate," Katsuki concludes, "You're opening a portal that teleports your hand from one space to another."

"That's right. It's the same for the front door. It's a gate that warps people from wherever I put it into the main body of the shop here. That's what lets me move around with it. It's not the house that moves — just the door."

"That's— that's convoluted as hell."

Koharu sighs. "Believe me, boy, I would know. This is what happens when your parents have quirks that are incompatible. I thought I was quirkless for eleven years, and it took another ten to understand the logistics enough to start using it long term like this."

"But doesn't your blood go bad? Or decompose? Wouldn't it mean having to re-do shit every other month?"

“It used to. Since my blood has the warping property only when it comes in contact with the air, I spent a long time looking for some kind of preservative that would prevent decomposition but not compromise its properties. I found it and can make my blood into paint with it now, so the front door and the purse should be good for decades after I die, but I still do touch-ups once in a while.” She puts the cookie tin back in the cubby and pockets the purse.

“That’s why the shop’s front door’s so tiny,” Katsuki guesses.

Healer hag nods. “Easier to maintain if the gate is smaller.”

Not for the first time, Katsuki finds himself thinking healer hag is pretty damn cool. That is until she bumps his calf with her cane. He scowls.

“Now finish hanging those up. You’re pushing it enough as is — standing up so long— the clothes will get crusty. ”

23.09.2XXX

The laceration on his wrist is already scabbed over even faster than the doctor’s measurement for a cut of that size and he’s got his body’s stellar healing to thank for that.

He’s still confused about where he stands with his quirk. The “side-effects” of it on his body work just fine, whether that be the fire-proofing or the rapid regeneration. Even the nitro-like crap is still in his bloodstream. The issue is, his palms don’t sweat, nor does the way he used to ignite the sweat serve its function. It’s like he’s been left with half a quirk.

He hisses as Koharu presses on the scab by accident while wrapping up his wrist. They sure do a whole lot of bandaging. Maybe if Katsuki stopped getting himself stabbed and burned and shoved in rooms for prolonged periods of time they wouldn’t have this problem. God doesn’t like him though so it doesn’t look like that’s gonna be any time soon.

“How long am I staying here?” he asks on impulse, finding the sticky noise of medical tape too loud in the silence. “It’ll be two weeks tomorrow.”

She doesn’t answer, focused on dressing the cut.

“You can’t keep me here forever.” *I can’t freeload off you forever*.

“And where will you go?” she asks, not looking at him, “Will you go back to your family?”

He’s… not sure.

—if that’s how you’re gonna act, maybe you should’ve never been born at all!

He’d never thought his parents liked him that much. Now he *knows* they don’t.

Healer hag takes his lack of answer to mean no. “Why won’t you?” she questions, “They must be worried about you.”

Katsuki scoffs. “Nah, they’re probably loving it. S’not like they hung around me a lot anyway.”

She raises a brow. “Are they that bad?”

“They’re fine,” Katsuki says, “Just loved to ditch me. I’m a shitty kid to handle.”

“Boy, you’re not a ‘shitty kid’. At least the you I know isn’t. I’ve never seen a teenager this good at housework. Doesn’t signal delinquent to me.”

He supposes that’s true. “I’ve still done bad things.” *Somehow you ain’t tired of me yet. We’ll get there eventually.*

“But you’ve changed, no?”

You could say that. The old Katsuki would’ve never accepted spending a quarter of the day bed-ridden and eating every meal through a straw. He has ‘changed’.

After a month of goddamn torture that is. What does that say about him, that he only ‘changed’ after getting starved and stabbed? It’s not like he’s made it up to Deku, or stopped being a trouble-making nuisance. So does it matter? And he knows he brought all that shit in the basement upon himself, knows he deserved it, but if it made him more bearable, does that mean it was a good thing? Does that mean it *helped*? Was it *beneficial* for him?

“Boy?”

He blinks. “Uh.”

“You zone out far too much.” She frowns. “I meant what I said about the psychologist.”

“I don’t need the nuthouse.”

Healer hag gives him her version of the stink eye. “Yeah,” she says after a pause, “you’re not leaving,”

“Why not?” *Why would you keep me around willingly? Ain’t I wasting your money and time?*

“You’re still too thin, and I can tell you’ve got no intention of going home. You leaving now would be the same as you having left on the first day. You’ll end up homeless and defenseless all the same.”

Weak. Quirkless. Defenseless. Those are words he used to associate with everything he hated. Apparently, that includes himself now.

“So either stay until you’re back to a healthier physical state or I deliver you to your parents myself. It’s your choice.”

He hates nice people. “Or you could always throw me out,” he suggests and receives a knock with the cane in return. “Wouldn’t keeping me here put you at risk of kidnapping charges if anyone found out?” *Why are you taking that chance for* me*?*

“I suppose… though it wouldn’t be a problem—”

She says it like she’s got enough connections to get away with something like that, but Katsuki can’t help but think of another reason. *She could say you threatened her, made her provide you with shit. And who would the police believe, a sweet old lady or your sorry reject villain ass?*

“— as long as no one found out.” Or that. That works too.

He doesn’t point out the other fact either. The fact that he knows she’s right and she can tell that. Because if Katsuki wanted to leave that bad he’d have tried doing so days ago. But he hasn’t, not even once. At the end of the day, he’s a needy piece of crap and he’d only realized how much of a difference shit like a bed and a bath and food made once he’d dipped his feet into life without them. A shitty-ass state he’s in, too scared to stop being a fucking leech and go back to his actual parents. At least they had some semblance of a moral obligation to provide for him.

I always knew you were going to fuck it up

Yet…

27.09.2XXX

Who'd have thought that gaining weight would be so fucking hard? Not Katsuki, that's who.

He's at a point where he can't count the bumps on his spine anymore, but compared to the sheer muscle mass he'd spent years working for before all this happened, it might as well be nothing. His body weight had been cut in half and in these twenty days or so of being awake, he hasn't gained back even five percent.

Or ten days, rather, since he'd been too stubborn to admit his porridge woes until scalpel incident day. He can eat light solid food now, a welcome break from the soups and liquids. But it's almost like his stomach is smaller. He used to be an athlete and he used to eat like one. Now, if he has a sandwich he won't be able to stomach anything else for the rest of the day.

Koharu says it's normal and will get better with time, but to Katsuki, it's another testament to how he's failed.

He dusts off his pajamas, digging his heel into the trail. The early morning sun is soft, diffused by the building grey clouds, the salty breeze more pronounced than ever. The island is quiet apart from the occasional song of a bird. He breathes in and keeps walking.

Uselessness —it's not a feeling he likes. And maybe he'd never made a mess quite this bad before, never made a mockery of every last one of his dreams, torn them apart, and scattered the ashes into the open mouth of a volcano, but he's felt useless before —those horrible first few months following the sludge villain come to mind— and in rare moments like that, he falls back on his favorite (among many) coping mechanisms.

Those are, work so hard you can't think, and pretend the problem is solved until you either forget about it or it solves itself. They're foolproof. Tested with a one-hundred percent success rate. Katsuki-certified, if you will.

He snorts. Phone charger blondie would pat him on the back for his recent leaps in self-awareness.

And he hasn't forgotten how the too many days he'd spent lamenting his weakness had culminated in getting stolen from his own house. The last time he allowed himself to wallow in self-pity, he'd ended up riddled with holes in a villain's basement

He's not going to make that mistake again, because he owes people now. Namely healer hag. Katsuki understands equivalent exchange very well, and bringing him back from the dead and clothing and housing him for this long is in no way equal to knocking out some small fry alley thug, no matter what Koharu insists on.

Katsuki hates useless people, and he hates being useless even more, so he's going to earn his keep if it kills him. The old lady has been as good as breaking the law because he's too much of a pussy to go back "home" to nothing, so fuck him, there won't be a single thing out of place on the entire island, much less the house if he has any say on it.

Since healer hag won't let him kick the bucket for some reason, he's got no other choice, something else will need to go on the crucifix instead, and that whisper of being an unwanted dead weight might as well be screaming "ME! PICK ME!"

The first day was met with resistance, but Katsuki is nothing if not stubborn, and once he'd all but shoved a spoon of his best fried rice recipe into Koharu's mouth, she'd granted him full jurisdiction over the kitchen and the chores in an instant. In an uncharacteristically un-grandma way, Koharu is pretty bad at cooking. She's patient with people but rushes everything else. It doesn't show as much with things like soups, but… let's just say Katsuki is glad he hadn't taken that cookie from her back then.

The trail narrows, at one point, shrinking enough to force him to use a fallen tree trunk as footing. But it's still only a walking trail and Katsuki had scaled every mountain within a kilometer of Musutafu by the time he was fifteen, so it's nothing, really. He's more pissed he's relegated to the walking trail when the other side of the tall hill is steeper, much better for actual climbing.

But this type of slow-building physical exercise is necessary if he wants to get fit properly again and not ruin his body more, so walking trail it is. *Suck it up you frail fuck.* He's at square one —lower than square one since his quirk decided to take a permanent time out— and it stings like hell.

"Shit—" In his absentmindedness, he'd tripped and fallen flat against

the path. He gets up, rubbing his nose and shifting his clothed, scraped (like he's fucking five) knee as he scans the patch of land behind him. He locates the culprit of his tumble with ease: a shiny greenish pebble. "Fucker of fucks," he says, glaring at it.

An irrational urge to grab it and put it in his pocket wins out over the visceral desire to throw the pebble from the hill straight into the ocean (something he could actually do if he still had his quirk, the ever-present bitter voice on his shoulder reminds). Its weight is insignificant in his pocket (the water bottle in the other pocket is much heavier), causing no more than a soft droop and providing a patch of cool where it hits his thigh between the fabric of his pajamas. It had been a pretty, deep green. Like finding a treasure.

Katsuki flushes at the childish thought. The hill is so silent he can hear two separate cicadas chirp.

Fuck it.

With the pebble stowed away safely, he continues on his path, picking up the pace as the summit grows closer and closer. Ten minutes later he's made it to the top, and he only realizes how much the whole half hour or so journey has taken out of him once he sits down on a mossy tree stump and all the air seems to whoosh out of his lungs at once.

Square one… more like square zero, square sub-fucking zero.

He tsks, drowning out his irritation with big gulps of water. That helps a little, but what kills the mess in his chest for real is his first look at the view.

The hill is not that high, he'd wager somewhere around a hundred meters above sea level, but it's the second-highest thing on this tiny island, and that means he has a clear view of pretty much an entire half of it, ocean and everything. It's not all that far from the mainland, he can just about make it out if he squints.

The waters are clear and bright, contrasting with the murky sky. The air up here is closer to chilly, and he can make out the patterns of trees and the corner of the shop building hidden among them, flat front garden sticking out like a sore thumb. The fresh scent of upcoming rain mixes with the one of seawater, and the moss covering the back of the stump is soft against his fingers.

Hiking had been a thing that stuck with him for many reasons. Usually, he cited the feeling it brought about in him, the status of

being above, of being on top of the world. The satisfaction of making the climb, of grappling over obstacles and overcoming challenge, that was reason number two.

And reason three?

"You want to go hiking?" she'd said, incredulous. "Give you a finger you'll take a whole arm, huh?"

"Hah?!" He'd wanted to argue that it was his body he'd be exerting and that letting him do the damned dishes was not 'giving a finger'. That was his job and right damnit.

"Alright, alright," she's said before he could get his chance to explode. "It's true that you've been cooped up for too long. There are a few hills out back. The small one has a decent natural trail the original owner of the island opened up."

"Not the one for ba—" Her glare made him snap his mouth shut.

"There's no need to always be on the offensive boy." He resisted the urge to bite his lip. "I don't know what you're looking to see up there —except water that is— but since you want to…"

The *view* is what he loves to see. The view is pretty. It could be breathtaking if you picked the right place.

And this one may not be the most mind-blowing, but it's calming regardless. It's vast, it's open. *This is what I dragged myself out of that godforsaken cell for,* he thinks. Freedom with not a single soul there to ruin it, with no one there to tap his shoulder and preach to him about how right or wrong or good or bad he is. With no one there to wind him up until the lava in his veins leaks out and burns everyone around him.

He etches the soft view into his memory before starting the downward hike back to avoid the storm he can see the beginnings of brewing in the far distance.

30.09.2XXX

"Stop nagging," he says, huffing at her.

"I will when you stop going at things a mile a minute."

A mile a minute? "Yeah, 'cuz taking a walk in the city after a whole

month is a ‘mile a minute'.”

“Your standards,” Koharu says, “are far too high.”

He tugs on his hood, adjusts the beanie to cover his hair. It’s been a long time, a good three months, he doubts anyone will recognize him even in Musutafu, much less in Osaka, but better safe than sorry. As long as he keeps to himself it should be fine. All he wants to do is take a walk in civilization again. He feels like a damn hermit.

Stuffing his hands in his front pocket, he walks into the main shop room, Koharu in toe. The sight of the tiny door, edges gilded in neon yellow, it’s a little intimidating, makes Katsuki feels like he never wants to go outside again, for a moment.

But he’s strong, so he pushes the entry open and crouches through, right into the real world.

“…”

“You look underwhelmed,” says healer hag, a ghost of a smile on her lips.

That’s because he is.

He isn’t sure what he was expecting, but what he gets is an abandoned building in a run-down neighborhood.

For some reason, it makes him breathe easier. What was he so intimidated for? “You can go. I’ll be fine,” he says and finds that he means it. Healer hag nods and lingers by the door for a second before slipping inside and drawing it closed.

It’s early in the evening and the street below the shop is as abandoned as the building housing the shop itself, lit by the oily glow of street lamps. He takes the stairs down. There’s barely anyone on the street at all, and when a couple of boys in their teens walk past him he stiffens and tugs on the strings of the hood. They pass without paying him any mind, glowing faint colors, and Katsuki exhales.

It’s fine. These are just normal people. It’s not the League or Dabi or anyone he used to know. It takes five hours to drive from Yokohama to Osaka and Koharu will be moving the shop to Tokyo tomorrow. No one knows he’s here.

Repeating that thought like a mantra, he makes his way to the

crossroad where this block is supposed to melt into the next. He steps onto the sidewalk with confidence he doesn't really have, something that becomes apparent the moment he lays eyes on the bustling street he's stumbled into.

Bustling isn't the right word. The street is fucking alive. Voices filter into his ears from every direction. Vendors yell out for the passer-bys' attention, cars honk and screech against asphalt and shine in a dozen colors. He sees a line more than thirty people long leading to a shop labeled bubble tea.

It's filled with noise. So much noise. Conditioned by the quiet hum of the house and the deafening silence of his cell before that, Katsuki has forgotten what the city sounds like. The smell of sweet and savory and spicy and too much assaults his senses.

"Out of the way please!" calls a voice behind him, and Katsuki flinches so hard it would be better called a jerk. A man with a cart of boxes rushes past him and disappears into a department store nearby, one promising twenty-four-hour service.

As if the regular view itself wasn't enough, every other person in this damn street seems to glow with something. Colors blur and melt together, and upon closer view, he notices differences in texture, some 'auras' are fuzzy, some thick like slime, and some thinner than smoke. They shift with the moving crowds, and as people bump into each other so do they, twisting into bursts of matter.

Katsuki's nails dig into his right wrist, the amalgamation of hundreds of things reminding him too much of All For One's monstrous aura on that night, struggling to fit through the door like some sort of demon. When blood blooms on his fingers he realizes he's stuck, and he can't do this at all. Hopes of exploration forgotten, he rushes back into the fold of the abandoned building housing the shop, looking for somewhere to stop and breathe.

"You're late," says Hon, cutting off Noriko's path to her section.

"I know!" she mumbles through the elastic in her mouth, hands busy with pinning her hair up. "Woke up late, and I took the wrong train."

He snickers. "You'd think you'd know the route in your sleep by now."

"Oh shut up, that nasty Yukike-sama tore into me enough already."

She scowls. “What *is* his problem? I told him ‘this is the first time I’ve been late in three years’ and he said ‘stop relying on your quirk’. I didn’t even mention my quirk! He’s not my supervisor either so it’s none of his business. S’not like anyone ever comes to my section—”

“Yeah, about that.” Hon has this shit-eating look on his face and when he moves out of the way as they get closer to Noriko’s section, Noriko sees it’s very much not empty.

“What?” she says dumbly, staring at the slight black hoodie-wearing figure pouring over three separate textbooks, “There’s no way. Someone must’ve threatened them.”

“*He* showed up by the front before the place even opened,” Hon explains, “Me and Hana were coming in to open up and we see him waiting on one of the benches. Looked like a high school-age kid.”

“You’re messing with me. Real funny, I’d be buying it more if you told me that was Yukike-san dressed up and playing a prank on me.”

Noriko’s section of the Tokyo Metropolitan Library is section Q, fittingly named to contain all advanced quirk-related scholarly texts. Noriko has read every single book in the section, and at some point, regurgitated theories on quirk factors and book-sized research papers on the quirk singularity start getting repetitive.

Her section has tumbleweeds blowing through it on *a good day*. Most people just use the internet for that kind of research, while labs that might need more in-depth information get permission to access the online archives and digitized texts. The same can be said about university students, whose institutions the library has partnerships with.

At most, she’ll get twenty visitors a month, once in a blue moon a study group. The last time she had a high school kid in here was three-hundred seventy-three days ago. She remembers the exact day because it was that rare an event.

“I’m not lying Riko, he was a high schooler through and through. Blond, emo and everything.”

“Blond and emo are not defining characteristics of high schoolers. Those could very well be characteristics of a mirage. For all I know he’s not there at all and me, you, and Hana-senpai are experiencing mass collective hallucinations.”

“Not hard to admit you’re pissy because you’ve got to keep an eye on him—” says Hon, stiffening as Noriko glares at him, “—which is why I brought you the new volume of the Spider Silk Chronicles! Aren’t I the best senpai?”

The book is thrust at her and Noriko swipes it, tucking it under her arm. “You’re gonna get me fired if you keep distracting me.”

“Only helping a kouhai out—” He looks around innocently.

Hon supervises the fiction section, the lucky bastard. Sometimes, Noriko will find herself salivating at the mere appearance of it, shelves over shelves of stories and worlds to explore. It makes her quirk so greedy. Someday she’ll nab that spot for herself, she’s sworn that.

His phone buzzes. “—oof, gotta go. Have fun!”

She waves him off and walks to her desk area, dropping her bag and the book next to her computer.

Honestly, it’s not that big of a deal. It’s a single person, and libraries are meant to be quiet, it isn’t like his presence will particularly disrupt her flow of work. She’s not going to fault people for reading at the library. After all, she’d become a librarian for that very reason, because books satisfied her quirk’s endless thirst for knowledge through harmless, enjoyable methods.

Getting paid to be around books? It sounded perfect, and it would have been perfect if only librarian work involved only reading books and none of this other stuff.

Stuff like organizing events and filing books and compiling reports and dealing with malfunctioning copy machines and *people*. It takes a lot of willpower to convince herself to at least enter the new shipment of quirk theory books donated by a closing down research facility a few blocks away into the library’s online database instead of cracking open the Spider Silk Saga right away, but she manages.

Four hours later she’s finished both that task and the four-hundred-page book (ended in another cliffhanger, the main heroine Kinu had been speared by the villain) and the mystery kid is still there.

He’s been reading the ‘Comprehensive Guide to Interpretations of the Quirk Factor’ (too long-winded, packed with too much anecdotal evidence and overall sloppy compared to the far superior but less known Quirk Factor Theory Dictionary—) whose orange cover is

recognizable even at a distance, for two hours now.

Noriko surveys him from the corner of her eye. The way he carries himself screams closed off and apprehensive, almost paranoid. If he's a high school kid, shouldn't he be at school? Last she checked October eighth wasn't an off day. Weird.

She checks the time on her computer. 11:46. Almost lunchtime. Definitely 'should be at school' time. Real weird.

She's got no time to think about it though, because she sees movement and it looks like the kid decided it's time to pack it up. Noriko plays it cool and acts like she wasn't just theorizing about him as he walks up to her desk, orange book in hand.

It makes a thud on the wood where he drops it. Noriko turns to face him. "Good day, sir, how may I help you?"

They make eye contact and Noriko fights the urge to freeze.

Holy shit.

"What'd I have to do to borrow this?" he asks, voice (*that* voice) rough, referring to the book.

Noriko has never forgotten a single detail of anything since she was five. Her quirk gives her flawless memory and the heightened mental capacity to keep up with it. And that's why, the moment she lays eyes on him, despite the dark face mask and the paler *everything*, she knows she's looking at Bakugou Katsuki. Otherwise known as that one feral UA kid who'd singlehandedly caused the biggest media scandal avalanche in recent Japanese history then proceeded to drop off the face of the Earth.

She recovers in half a second, picking up on all the clues all but spelling out his desire to stay unrecognized and rolling with it, pretending she's never heard of Bakugou Katsuki in her life.

"Sign up for a library card," she replies like she would to any other visitor.

His face falls a little. Without saying a thing, he grabs the book and walks back to the shelves, returning it to the correct spot. Noriko feels like he's taking heavy steps, but they make no noise, even as he steps over a spot on the floor she knows is squeaky. He doesn't come back to her desk, instead walking past without sparing her a second glance

and heading straight for the exit.

Noriko brings up the camera system on her computer, not to be a stalker or anything, but because she's a little disappointed at the short interaction and curious about where the kid will head next. If he's leaving or he's moving to another section, and if it's the latter, which one. But the cameras show something weird, blurry staticky blobs where Bakugou is supposed to be, like they're having a malfunction in only one specific area. The camera facing the front desk with the library card machines blacks out altogether, for a moment.

Strange, she thinks. She's sure Bakugou's quirk is explosions, and she doesn't see how that could correlate with making cameras drunk…

The blob of static disappears out the entranceway and all the cameras go back to normal.

She buzzes in her seat for the remaining ten minutes to lunch break and shoots up, grabbing her bento from her bag and striding to the desks at the entranceway, mentally preparing herself to speak to Yukike.

He stares at her with stern eyes. "Oboe, slacking off? You can't rely on your quirk forever." *Again with that crap. Just because your snow hair quirk sucks for library work doesn't mean you get to be salty.*

"No, no of course not boss!" she says, masking the annoyance behind sheepishness, "I finished inputting the new data for the shipment tomorrow already."

His eyes narrow at that, and figures, he doesn't believe her even after three years of working together, so he starts clicking away at his computer. Noriko can see the exact moment his hopes of catching her slipping are cut short and it gives her a lovely kick of satisfaction.

"Anyway, I wanted to ask, did a kid with pale hair and a black hoodie pass by here earlier—" She motions with her hand, indicating Bakugou's rough height. "—about this tall?"

"Yeah, he just left. Weird kid, wouldn't give me his name." So Yukike didn't recognize him and Bakugou *is* trying to hide. Interesting. "I assume he's one of those hooligan teens who think poorly of elders." He sneers. "But I gave him a blank pass anyway, wouldn't want him to start spreading bad rumors about the library."

"Good thinking!" Well, whatever floats his boat. Noriko doesn't think

anyone would be jobless enough to leave bad reviews on a public library but Yukike is convinced he has to protect this place's reputation like it's god and who is Noriko to break his happy delusions.

"He didn't hand his pass back in, so there's a good chance he'll be coming back--"

That's good. That's great.

" —Oboe! What's your deal with that kid anyway?"

"Huh?" She's snapped out of her thoughts. "Oh nothing, I got a bit curious, there are few people that young in my section."

Yukike sizes her up one more time, as if trying to judge both her honesty and her love and dedication to the subtle art of librarian-ism in one motion. At last, his eyes shift back to his computer screen. "Back to work Oboe. Don't get distracted."

"Yes boss." Her reply is unenthusiastic, but she's glad she can get out of Yukike's hair.

She finds Hon eating at his usual spot in the staff room.

“That kid, he was Bakugou Katsuki,” she whispers at him. Hon chokes on his dumpling for three minutes.

Once he’s downed two whole cups of water, he says, ”Now *you’re* messing with me.” Noriko shrugs.

“I know what I saw and it was him.”

“But he was so…”

“Not as advertised?” Hon nods. He *was* paler, thinner, subdued, skittish, a far cry from the walking bomb plastered all over the internet.

“I didn’t recognize him at all.”

“Didn’t seem like he wanted to be recognized.” The question is why? Why is he in Tokyo? Why is he in the library? Why is he in the Q section of the library? Why is he so quiet and why does his existence ruin cameras? Noriko— Noriko is curious.

“I hope he comes back.”

Chapter End Notes

A thing I've been on the ropes about actually is the swearing. I'm not a native English speaker so words like fuck and shit and the like are sort of mild to me? Like in the sense that I say fuck all the time but I've never said the equivalent of fuck in my language ever. So I'd imagine that for some native English-speaking readers the constant swearing might be jarring in the way constant swearing in my language would make me feel? So I've decided to try and use the "bad" words sparingly specifically in narration and description. That's not to say I'm gonna get rid of it though because I have a potty mouth when I speak English and luckily Katsuki does too so I can make him swear to my heart's content lmao.

Regarding the OCs from the library, they're not going to be crazy plot-important. They're more there to link Katsuki to the rest of the world and offer an outsider perspective/some important exposition on him if you will. Some tiny info on all of them:

(standard disclaimer that I am not/do not speak Japanese so the kanji for their names is made using a dictionary. i profusely apologize for any mistakes)

Oboe (覚え - sense, experience) Noriko (紀子 - chronicle child) - nicknamed Riko and has a photographic memory quirk that can't be turned off.
Hon (本 - volume or tome) - quirkless.
Yukike (雪 'yuki' snow and 毛 'ke' hair/fur) Gento (厳 'gen' stern, strictness, severity and 人 'to' person) - his hair is snow, like mineta but he grows snow instead of grapes or whatever that stuff on mineta's head is.

and Koharu:

Iki (域 area) Koharu (小 'ko' small and 陽 'haru' sunshine)

It's been fascinating for me to see how this story has developed and how much its changed from the of draft. In the first version I had katsuki's parents kick him out lol. I dialed it back a little for the actual story. Next chapter we're taking a little detour to Mitsuki and Masaru's perspectives on all of this and Izuku having a bad bad time at the provisional license exam.

Tokyo Metropolitan Library is a real place I based the library here on but I've taken some creative liberties (the real one opens later

for one, you can't check out books at all and there are no IDs needed. there's no fiction section in the irl library either) with how it works and how it's set up + employee timetables since BNHA is supposed to be a couple of centuries into the future and all. If anyone is curious about the real library you can check out their website https://www.library.metro.tokyo.lg.jp/english/

Chapter 9: Mitsuki (feat. Midoriya Izuku having a bad time)

Chapter Summary

A little family contemplation and uncomfortable encounters for the green broccoli.

tw// canon-typical violence, child neglect

Chapter Notes

Hello again.

You may have noticed I've changed a few things (re-did the story summary and tags) and they're mostly for clarity's sake. I've set the number of chapters to 30 because as of now that's my loose plan but it may change in the future. I've been thinking about changing to spacing between paragraphs from double to single spaced too but that's more an aesthetic thing than anything. If you friends think single spaced would be easier to read please do let me know.

i'd also like to thank everyone for the crazy reception this fic has gotten bc we've passed 10k hits and that's kinda mind boggling to me. thank you so much for all your attention and comments and kind words because they really do keep me going.

beware, from here on out is about the time that crack treated seriously tag starts coming into play I have no idea what I'm doing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“—we’ll be back at work tomorrow, yes. Tell Tomoe-san to ready the office if you can,” Masaru says into the phone. “Don’t worry about it—no— we’ll be fine—”

The conversation filters into one of Mitsuki’s ears and out the other. She props her own phone onto one of the yet unpacked moving boxes littering the new living room, staring hard at the contact for Detective Tsukauchi. Nothing on the phone screen changes. There hasn’t been a new message in days.

She can feel herself getting pissed, so, to nip that weed in the bud, she drags the box closest to the couch towards her and tries (to no avail) to tear off the tape with her nails.

They had to move, Masaru and her it's just them now. Because their house had been "compromised", labeled a crime scene or whatever. People knew who lived there. There was no guarantee the villains who stole their son wouldn't come back to finish the job and get rid of them too.

Isn't that something?

I don't think he's at home Auntie Mitsuki. I don't think he's been at home for a while.

She laughs without humor. Halfway through it turns into a curse at the stupid, taped too tight box.

Their new house is a small rented apartment on the west end of Musutafu, ten minutes or so away from their office building. The apartment block is nice, but not super fancy. *Keep a low profile* the police had said. The move was simple, they packed everything up, called the movers, and had it delivered to their new place on the same day. It had been that easy, letting the old house go.

The bed, clothes, kitchen knick-knacks, and toiletries are the only things they've bothered to unpack. The apartment came furnished and neither of them have been much in the mood for interior design, so their current décor consists of boxes piled over boxes. Not that they're not used to living like this —after all, they've spent half their careers strewn about hotel rooms and the other half using their office as a second home.

They work all the time. For them, work is life. And maybe that was part of the problem.

She met Masaru in university —they were paired up for a group project and they hadn't known the first thing about each other. Hadn't liked each other either. The differences in approach were too steep to stomach. Where Masaru was calm and gentle she was loud and in your face, and it showed in their designs too. Mitsuki's friends had lamented her fate, talked about how much her style clashed with '*that quiet guy's*' and how hard a time they'd have working together.

But, as cliché as the whole idea of opposites attract is, it remains a law of the universe, and it very well described what had happened with

them. Passion was a trait they shared, and soon they saw that the designs and ideas they came up with were, in a pleasant twist of events, good, really really damn good. They aced the project and kept pairing up after that. As a team, they were unstoppable —determined to make a name for themselves.

Things were hard, at first. They moved in together when money was tight and jobs were sparse. The thing about the fashion industry was that, on top of being cutthroat and competitive, it was a game of elitism. Grunt work was easy to find, but neither she nor Masaru had that one relative or that famous uncle or that well-known parent to put in a good word for them. They were newbies in a world that loved to keep people out. Constant networking and socializing were expected on top of the actual design work.

It wasn't what Mitsuki had envisioned, but they made it work. It took a good five years to find stable positions they both liked and two more to get personal side projects off the ground, sure, but all the hustle had done was make Mitsuki more eager to prove herself.

Frustrated by the box, she gets up and gets the box cutter from the entryway cupboard. The cutter slices through the tape with ease and she finally has the box open. It's the one with the photo albums, go figure. The universe hates her today.

She picks up the familiar red-covered album sitting at the top, 'Katsuki Memories' scribbled at its corner and places it on her lap. She opens it to the first page and is met with a very bald red-eyed chubby baby.

They'd had Katsuki when things were smooth sailing and it continued that way for a while. They were at a place with work where they were getting the perfect amount of jobs to get by comfortably and squeeze in time to take care of Katsuki as well. Though they could never agree on the best way to raise him, they were happy. Katsuki was like her in so many ways, from looks to personality, and perhaps the unwillingness to crush that kindred spirit had been one of the reasons things had soured.

As she leafs through the album Katsuki grows before her eyes, from a grumpy baby to a menace of a toddler. An entire four pages is dedicated to what she'd labeled 'the pudding incident', a dramatic set of photographs where a Katsuki who can't be older than two smears pudding all over Masaru's hair and glasses. Mitsuki softens at the memory, chest tightening. She'd forgotten how small he'd once been.

The photos grow fewer and further between the more she flips through the album.

Fashion design remained for them a priority, and, a little after Katsuki turned four, things really started picking up, their start-up began making waves in local circles and beyond, and suddenly, they were addled with work. Caught in this dilemma of furthering their careers or paying careful attention to Katsuki who was showing himself to be gifted at too many things, they realized that, when it came down to it, neither of them knew how to parent now that Katsuki had grown from cute menace who made messes sometimes to a too-smart, opinionated, and temperamental kid who needed a lot more than a sippy cup.

There was a part of him that was like Masaru too, this bubbling undercurrent of emotion. Sometimes he'd get antsy like Masaru did, except it materialized in the form of screaming and tantrums and property destruction, much more reminiscent of her. Mitsuki didn't understand it, it made Katsuki uniquely vulnerable for reasons she couldn't comprehend and in a way she didn't know how to deal with. It was a weakness to exploit, and if he wanted to be a hero and survive he couldn't have any of those. So she'd crushed it.

In the end, they did the closest thing to running away they could. They chose work, and spent more and more time away from Katsuki, often leaving him at daycare centers or with extended family members (they didn't have many close ones) for extended periods of time. The brat grew further abrasive after the appearance of his quirk and was so good at everything Mitsuki had just known he'd get a big head.

So she tried to hit two birds with one stone and signed him up to as many extracurricular activities as possible: music, dance, STEM, art, jiu jutsu, karate, kickboxing, you name it. This was in part to make up for the lack of time they spent with Katsuki, and in part to find something he was not good at that would burst his inflating ego.

She comes across a photo of a glaring Katsuki dressed in a fashionable kid's ensemble, hair slicked back. He must be seven or eight years old. She'd tried modeling gigs with him too. Landing them wasn't hard, because he had a good build and a good face. It's her face after all.

"This is crap," he'd complained, sizing himself up in the mirror between outfit changes. "We've been here for three hours and all I've done is had people dress me in stupid clothes and powder me with stupid makeup."

"That's how photoshoots work, brat," she'd pointed out while replying to a

text from a client. When she looked up at him he'd been pouting, the glare of the studio lights rendering the flush of his skin harshly. He'd looked tired, skittish, and disappointed, but Mitsuki hadn't given it more than a passive consideration.

"I don't like this one lady, mom." He'd fidgeted, digging his hand into his pant pocket. "She keeps touching me weird."

"She's just measuring you for fittings Katsuki," she'd said, attention turned back to her phone screen. This client was particularly picky, but they were high-profile too.

"It was weird…" His voice had trailed off once he'd noticed she wasn't listening at all. Two minutes later: "Mom, can we leave?"

"Not until you're done." A change of color to black all of a sudden? she'd thought, reading the text. It would clash with the rest of the suit. Tasteless rich boy.

He'd made a noise close to the whine before a tantrum. "I need to go burn off my sweat somewhere."

"Wipe it off. Don't you dare use your quirk indoors."

"This is pointless is what! You said it would be good for hero work," he'd grumbled, kicking the ground hard where he was pacing as he soaked a discarded napkin with nitroglycerin. "And you said you'd watch! You haven't been watching... I'm s'posed to be a fighter, not a prissy princess!"

"Don't make a scene Katsuki," she'd said with a warning tone. "Look, the stylist is calling you. You're the one who agreed to come, so don't embarrass me."

It was like he held a personal grudge against the very concept of fashion after that. He began wearing the most hideous clothes, and ties and belts ceased to exist in his wardrobe. Maybe that was to piss her off.

What little parenting they did, Mitsuki had monopolized. She took Katsuki's bad sides and placed them under constant scrutiny. Made sure that he knew to behave and not cause problems.

She'd always zero in on the worst grades on his near-perfect report cards. *"An 89 in English? Have you been slacking off?*" Things like that. She was stingy with the praise and stingier with the affection.

Straighten up.

Stop scowling.

Don't grumble.

Don't be a burden.

Because Katsuki was amazing and he already had more than enough people praising him for it. He didn't need more ego fuel, he needed people to keep him grounded and knock him down a peg.

By the time his tenth birthday rolled around, she and Masaru were established industry figures, and they could not afford scandals. Soon Katsuki started refusing privately hired caretakers (Not that they were that common anyway. In fact, it was frowned upon. But Masaru and Mitsuki were away so much they had no other choice short of bringing Katsuki with them and making him miss school), and after the third time he'd driven one to tears they'd given up on bringing other people home to take care of him altogether.

"—would you quit it!" she'd whisper-yelled, dragging him into the kitchen by the hair. "That's the third one. Third! How hard can it be to act like a normal damn child for one day?!"

"Let me go you dumb hag." A crackle from his hands earned him a smack. He knew better than to use his quirk near her. "It's not my fault everyone you hire is from the loony bin."

"Enough Katsuki, I can't keep leaving work on your whims"

"This is the first time, and no one asked you to leave your stupid work."

"Don't sass me brat—" Another smack. "—you're going to calm down and apologize to Miyamoto-san right now. You've already caused enough trouble today."

"I was trying to get food and she said I was an animal that needed fixing! The nasty hag shouldn't have locked me in my ro—ouch—"

"Can it with the excuses." She'd assumed he must have done something. Miyamoto was an elderly neighbor that had moved into their area a few months back. She was a sweet old lady, and when she'd offered to keep an eye on Katsuki for a few days Mitsuki had been relieved. It was rare enough that a babysitter be available at all for kids Katsuki's age. She and Masaru had an important deadline less than a week away. They couldn't

even stop to breathe. The thought of the precious time Katsuki's tantrum was wasting and the embarrassment of it all had been making her queasy.

"I hate her and you."

Paying that declaration no mind, she'd taken him into the living room where Miyamoto was waiting, wiping away tears with a handkerchief. She'd pinched his arm and pushed down his head.

Once she'd heard the choked "I'm sorry," leave his mouth she'd let him go and he'd scurried off upstairs. Mitsuki apologized further to poor Miyamoto.

"It's alright dear," the old woman had assured. "It must be a real struggle, having to deal with a child like that."

Mitsuki hadn't even asked what it was that the brat had done.

Katsuki is ten in the last picture within the album. They hadn't taken anymore in the six years after that. She stares at the empty clear pockets occupying the second, latter half of the book and feels like they're judging her.

For better or worse he'd become independent by eleven, and Mitsuki trusted him to spend weeks alone at home with no issues. But that independence came with a total closing off on what little emotional trust they'd had, Katsuki rarely talked to them about anything outside of boastful aspirations of heroism and UA. As their careers hit an all-time high, things at home strained to an all-time low, and few and far between were the days when she and Katsuki could have a conversation without screaming profanities at each other.

The Sludge Villain had been the tipping point, and Mitsuki and Masaru were faced with another dilemma. Worry over their son's near-death versus the headaches that the publicized stunt caused. Katsuki grew quiet, while their work took a hit from all the mixed press. His name hadn't been published due to minor privacy protection laws, but there were dozens of uncensored videos up on the internet with his face on full display for the world to see. One was over twenty minutes long. Mitsuki couldn't bear to look at them.

It had been a stressful time and faced with an emotionally disconnected son and the newly tangible fear that he might get hurt again at any moment, especially with the career he was looking to have, Mitsuki had been harsh. Katsuki *had* to be strong. Her heart couldn't handle a repeat.

“How could you be stupid enough to get caught?!”

“You were showing off again weren’t you?”

“You’re lucky the heroes are covering all the damages you did to the street.”

Those were the types of things she’d said.

It somehow grew even worse with UA. Because the school had students thrust into the spotlight from the first month of attending and constantly advertised hero-hopefuls, Katsuki had to sign a media agreement like every other UA hero course student, and they couldn’t stop the media from writing articles with his name on them unless they wanted to seriously stunt his prospects as a future hero. The media exposure was essential for heroes because they were public figures who needed to put themselves out there. There’d be no sense in holding or broadcasting the sports festival if the law prevented hero news outlets from discussing the contestants.

This did not work in Katsuki’s favor, because he’d made an absolute mess of the festival, throwing a massive tantrum for winning against Endeavor’s son of all people and getting so pissed he had to be chained to the podium. The news outlets and tabloids did not hold back and Mitsuki and Masaru could do nothing but watch.

It was an embarrassment of the highest degree and Mitsuki had made sure he knew that. Their business took another hit as whispers that their son was on his way to becoming a villain made rounds all the way to fashion circles.

And if the sludge villain had been the tipping point, the call informing her Katsuki had gone and gotten himself booted from the school had brought about the severing of their final sliver of a relationship. They’d been preparing to leave for a two-month stay in Italy. Milan Fashion Week was near and they’d scored a partnership with an Italian brand Mitsuki had idolized since she was a student.

“I know, we haven’t been there when we should’ve been.” She’d screamed at him when he’d come home that day, looking haggard and pissed off. “I know we haven’t been model parents who hold hands with you and tuck you in and give you kisses or whatever the fuck, but this? This, Katsuki?”

“I always knew you were gonna fuck it up—” She’d paced around the living room, digging holes of pure rage into their expensive carpet. “Why—why do you keep causing trouble?! How the fuck are you going to fix this?!

Don't you want to be a hero? How could you bully another kid like some two-bit delinquent?!"

"Fucking Deku—"

She's slapped him. It had been a real hard slap, one meant to hurt a lot. Nothing like the smacks she usually went for. She'd seen the surprise on his face and felt it in her own expression. For a moment, a very brief one, she regretted it. It went as quick as it came though, and soon the only things left in her were anger, indignation, and burning disappointment.

"Izuku? You still call him that horrible name? Katsuki, what the fuck is wrong with you?! I didn't raise you this way!"

"Yeah, because you didn't raise shit—"

"Well, you're making me think that was a damn good choice. If this is what you're going to act like, maybe you should've never been born at all!"

"Mitsuki!" Masaru had hissed, looking lost in their mess of a fight.

And okay, she knows that one was taking it too far. She hadn't thought so at the time though, drowning in tension.

"He's off the rails Masaru, I don't care. We're leaving. Katsuki, you better get your shit together and have this fixed when we come back, otherwise, you're in for it."

She'd seethed the entire ride to the airport.

Now, faced with the half-empty album she'll never get to fill, in a half-empty apartment with her son nowhere to be seen, she can't help but feel she'd been far from a good parent.

She'd thought "*Your son has been declared missing."* was bad, try "*Your son's DNA has been found in a villain organization's human experimentation lab."* A real kicker. Kicks you straight to the gut and makes you feel like you'll never get up from it again.

A fucking slap to the face is what. Mitsuki had accepted that with Katsuki's heroism aspirations he was guaranteed injuries, the occasional hospital stay maybe, but she'd crossed out the possibility of death. Her son, her stupid little firecracker of a kid doesn't fucking die. He doesn't…

She rubs away the angry tears before they get a chance to escape the

corners of her eyes. In the end, it wasn't some heroic act that did him in, it wasn't some courageous battle. He'd been a civilian. He—*her* brat got taken from right under their noses and put through god knows what. He was as good as dead and their last talk together ended like *that*. They can't even hold a damned funeral because they don't know where he is. All they've got left to show for him is a puddle of damned blood.

The couch dips beside her and she sniffs, leaning into Masaru and letting him pull her into a side hug.

Your son's DNA has been found in a villain organization's human experimentation lab.

Hah. There are certain things your brain crosses out as possibilities. You read the horror stories online and swipe by the rare, sensational news article, thinking, *oh poor them, thank god that's never going to happen to me.* Human fucking experimentation very much fits that criteria. Her son is… Katsuki is…

If only she'd paid attention to his needs and problems growing up so the bullying had never happened in the first place. If only she'd done more to ensure his safety. If only she hadn't assumed he'd be okay. If only they'd considered that him not picking up their calls for weeks was more than teenage rebellion and stubbornness. If only they hadn't run away *again*.

Mitsuki thinks she may just be the worst parent in the world.

The ground breaks apart beneath Izuku's feet. The debris obscure the rest of the class from view, and he braces himself to avoid a bad landing where he's thrown against some rubble. He gets up and wipes away the dust on his gloves, taking cover behind an overturned slab of concrete and checking himself over for injuries. *The Ketsubutsu students have done their homework*, he thinks. *We'll need to team up again to combat their cooperative abilities. The over a year of training they've got on our class shows and can't be remedied by the extra experience. Everyone here is strong. We should…*

The thought is cut off by one of the tagging balls whizzing past him at light speed, nicking the target on his shoulder and turning it red.

"Gotcha! You shouldn't be zoning out like that y'know," says a feminine voice. It's a student from Shiketsu, the hat recognizable at a glance. Izuku tenses. He hadn't noticed her approaching at all.

“People usually go for the ones they have the most information on at these exams,” she continues, “Since you’re from UA, I wanted to find out a little bit more about you. You’re pretty cool.”

His choice to take cover backfired. He’s cornered. “You sure talk a lot,” he replies, scanning the area and her posture.

Something feels off about her. Izuku can’t place it, but he’s given no time to contemplate. *I have to hurry, she might have allies around.* Another ball rushes past his face, and in that split second Izuku is distracted she’s gone again. Izuku feels his stomach drop further and uses dodging the next swipe as a chance to alter his position and try to get the upper hand on her. But it happens again, she disappears the moment Izuku has prepared himself to tag her targets. Is she an older more experienced student or just abnormally fast? Is it her quirk?

“D’you think my quirk is to disappear?” A hand is at his back, and the soft touch is juxtaposed by the powerful push knocking him forward. The unstable ground beneath him collapses under their combined weights and they fall into a pocket of concrete and rebar. Despite the messy scuffle, she’s got him pinned in seconds. “I was only hiding.”

He tries to move his left hand, but it's caught under a chunk of rubble. It hurts, pins and needles alight across his forearm. There’s a good chance it’s broken. Izuku is stuck. The feeling of discomfort intensifies.

“This is my skill.” She leans in far too close (What is her problem? She’s not even tagging him she’s just being weird. Has she forgotten this is an exam?) whispering into his ear. “Getting someone’s attention away from me. I don’t breathe or think, at that moment. The not thinking, that’s the difficult part.”

That sounds way too brutal to be a tactic a first-year would learn in school. A bead of sweat makes its way down Izuku’s face. This shouldn’t be any different from training. It’s a controlled exam, he reminds himself, and they’re both hero students. He knows all of that, yet why does a part of him feel like he’s back at USJ, at the training camp, at Kamino?

She’s not budging… I have to distract her.

“You learn that at Shiketsu?” He tries to make the disbelief bleed through to his voice.

“The secret to proper training is not to think of it as training.” She presses closer. “Huhuhu, we’re wondering about each other. My turn

now, why do you want to be a hero?"

Huh? What sort of question is that?

"Can't we do questions later?" Izuku says, voice strained. The exam is timed! He can't afford to fail.

She ignores him, and briefly removes one of the hands pinning Izuku's right to the ground to reach for something in her belt. Then, there's a cool, razor-thin pressure at Izuku's neck. Hold on… What?! He tries to angle his eyes to his side and sure enough, the Shiketsu girl is holding a knife to his neck. A real knife. It makes sense that they would be allowed like any support item, but for some reason, it's still jarring. What is she doing?! She still hasn't even bothered to tag the rest of Izuku's targets! She…

The temperature in their little pocket of rubble seems to drop several degrees. It's in a shaded area and sort of obscured from view from the rest of the field. It smells dusty. It feels dusty. His heartbeat rings in Izuku's ears, any other sound in the field silent. Izuku tries to loosen her hold on his arm but she presses the knife against him harder, drawing a few beads of blood. *She could kill me right now,* he thinks and his nerve ends seem to light with liquid danger.

"Is it pride? Honor? Is there… someone you want to save?"

At an instant, his mind fills with red eyes and blonde hair. Without his consent, his brain spawns images of Kacchan's empty house and dusty room, and broken phone. Of Kacchan's whereabouts unknown and— and the Nomu factory and the cell and those pictures. Kacchan—

"Kacchan?" says the girl, and Izuku's breath hitches. Had he been talking aloud? "Kacchan… hmm… does he look—" Izuku feels the sensation of something dripping against his back and his brain stutters to a halt as her voice changes mid-sentence to that familiar gravelly tone, "—like this?"

"Who are you?!" Izuku demands and his eyes widen when he sees Kacchan's hands holding his arm down and pressing the knife to his back, Kacchan's hair at the corners of his vision.

"I'm Kacchan," says Shiketsu girl, who's turned into an exact copy of Kacchan and sounds too much like Kacchan (*who is missing and gone and a bloody puddle*) and for a moment Izuku wonders *what if that really is Kaccha—*

“Stop lying.”

“I’m not. Tell me a little more about us, Izuku.” It’s wrong all *so* wrong and Izuku can feel his entire body lock up. The smokey air is suffocating. “Why do you want to save me, if I bullied you?”

“You’re a villain, aren’t you?” he says in disbelief, “You’re with the League.”

It’s a blind guess, but Ka—Shiketsu girl’s silence is as good as a confirmation. Even the sound of Izuku’s heartbeat fizzles out of his mind as he locks on a new target. This girl knows what happened to Kacchan. She might know where Kacchan is. Izuku has to get her to answer him. One for All flares in his fingers and they dig through the concrete like soft clay, crackling beneath his palm. He uses the new pocket of air to flick his fingers, and the point-blank quirk-powered hit makes the ground break apart again. For a moment she loses her hold on him, and that’s all Izuku needs to knock the knife from his—her hands and release his own pinned left arm (by yanking it from under the rubble, ow).

He’s not sure what overtakes him in that moment, a single-minded and visceral need to get fake Shiketsu Kacchan to guide him to real Kacchan and *answer* him. He twists fake Shiketsu Kacchan’s arm around and reverses their previous positions. “Tell me everything you know,” he says in a fervent, feverish tone. The fact that she looks like Kacchan isn’t helping with keeping calm.

“I don’t know. I said I’m Kacchan.” Izuku falters for exactly zero point zero three seconds, *what if it is him*— running through his mind again before it’s squished with a vehemence.

“I’m not falling for that. Tell me everything you know,” he repeats, firmer.

Shiketsu Kacchan’s face hardens for a moment before twisting into an expression Kacchan has never in his life made, an almost elated glee on the complete opposite end of the cocky adrenaline junky expressions real Kacchan used to make. It’s up there with the most disturbing things Izuku has ever seen in his life.

“You figured it out… you’re so cool Izuku.” That’s a sentence he’s wanted to hear from Kacchan for years and the fact that it’s coming from fake Shiketsu Kacchan is making Izuku want to deck fake Shiketsu Kacchan more than everything real Kacchan ever did made Izuku want to deck him. But she’s admitting to it, she is with the

League, the League who kidnapped Kacchan.

“Where did you take him?!” Izuku demands in an effort to distract himself from her appearance, the beginnings of something roiling in his chest

She knows where Kacchan is. She has to know. This is important. This could be a break in the case. This could make all the difference. Izuku needs to pull that information out of her. He has to. He needs to know what happened to Kacchan.

“Who, Kacchan?” She’s given up on her cover altogether, and the name sounds wrong on Kacchan’s lips. “He was so much fun. He sneezed on me! They never let me cut him though.”

Izuku blanches. “What did you do to him?” he tries again, frustrated.

“He tried to blow up Jin a lot, and the muscle guy broke his leg like it was a twig. It was hot, he was so beat up.”

By muscle guy does she mean Muscular? Kacchan had gone up against him on his own while in captivity? Izuku feels sick.

“And after that?”

“Tomura said they were making him into one of those Nomu things.” No no no no no no no no. “He visited too. Said it was coming along great. ” NO NOPE NO. “But All Might came and busted our hideout, so Tomura said his Sensei killed him. Real sad. I never got to cut him even a little.” Fake Shiketsu Kacchan pouts like they’re talking about losing a game of claw machine and not real Kacchan’s death.

Because All for One killed Kacchan. All Might hadn’t gotten the chance to question All for One yet, but Izuku had been hoping… knowing it was delusional wishful thinking… he’s wanted so hard…

The wetness in his eyes sneaks up on him and grief washes over him all over again. He loses sight of everything for a moment, forgetting fake Shiketsu Kacchan is still very much a dangerous villain. Whoever they are takes advantage of the situation to get away from him.

“—Deku-kun?” he hears another familiar voice but doesn’t bother to move to face it or check who it is, doesn’t bother to move at all. “Bakugou?!” says the same voice.

“Aw… looks like that’s all the time I’ve got for today Izuku…” Fake

Shiketsu Kacchan's voice rings in his ears. "Sorry about Kacchan. He really was fun."

Izuku waits in the lobby of the stadium after he's done giving his report to and getting a standard check-up from Gang Orca, sitting between Uraraka and Sero. It had been the two of them who'd found him, both having tried to regroup with Izuku after passing the exam themselves. The plastic chair digs into him.

"What was that, man?" asks Sero, sounding worried. Uraraka has a similar expression on her face. "It looked like B—"

"It wasn't Kacchan," he interrupts, tired. Sero deflates, muttering a "thought he sounded weird" under his breath. They don't know Kacchan is missing, only a select few people do. The case is being kept a tight secret, and after everything that happened the first time Izuku went and blabbered to the entire class his fault he's never taking that chance again. Among his classmates, everyone, bar Kirishima who'd discovered Kacchan's empty house with him and Todoroki who'd been himself kidnapped and extrapolated what was going on from things he'd heard from the villains, is none the wiser. "It was a villain though…"

"But why did they target you?"

"I don't know either Uraraka-san. They said they 'wanted to know more about me'."

Uraraka bites her lip, fiddling with the cuffs of her costume. "It must've been scary."

"It was." He sighs.

"You'd think they'd improve security already," she says, and Sero nods. Izuku is grateful to them for trying to fill the empty space.

"Midoriya is like a villain magnet," Sero says in an effort to lighten the mood. He's not wrong.

Aizawa-sensei shows up a few minutes later. "You two head back into the waiting room and focus on the second part of the exam. I'll handle this," he says, referring to Uraraka and Sero.

"Aren't they calling it off, y'know, there was a villain in here…" Sero points out.

“The commission determined it to be an isolated case. The exam will continue.” Sensei doesn’t sound happy about it, and the exchange makes Izuku remember that the exam isn’t done yet, and he didn’t even pass the first part. Izuku needs to pass. This exam is important for All Might’s successor. It’s important if he wants to have more leverage with getting to do things in the Kacchan case.

“What about me?”

Aizawa-sensei eyes him and Izuku eyes him right back, a small part of him still a little miffed because *if Aizawa-sensei had just listened to Izuku back then they wouldn’t be in this situation*. “You’re in no state to keep going.”

The bandage on his neck and the splint around his left arm isn’t the best look, but this is nothing. He *needs* to pass. “I need to pass,” he says.

“You got ambushed and threatened. You need to rest,” Izuku opens his mouth to protest but Sensei doesn’t cut him any slack. “What’s six times seven?”

His brain is buzzed, so he says “Sixty-seven,” without thinking. Great job Izuku.

“Exactly,” says Sensei. “You’ll get to retake the exam another time.” He turns to Sero and Uraraka again. “You two, go.”

Once they’re alone they sit back down in those uncomfortable plastic chairs, and Sensei hands Izuku some sort of gummy candy packet. Izuku pops one in his mouth. It’s apple flavored. He tries to focus on it. It’s the same brand his mom used to buy when he was a kid. It’s probably a coincidence that Aizawa-sensei picked it, but it helps, a little.

“The villain— they said Kacchan is dead. All for One killed him.”

People come and go in the stadium, paying them no mind. Aizawa-sensei doesn’t say anything. There’s nothing he can say. Deep down they both knew. There’s been no trace of Kacchan anywhere, and one doesn’t survive that amount of blood loss with no medical treatment. Some clues pointed towards him having made it out of the room with the blood puddle, but, even so, he’d have showed up to a hospital at some point if he was still alive. There’s still the uncomfortable option of Kacchan being so disfigured that when he had shown up at a hospital no one had recognized him, but that’s a possibility Izuku isn’t

willing to grapple with.

And that's the worst part of this situation, isn't it? In the end, there's no closure. A million things could've happened on that rainy day — Kacchan could've been mere meters away from Izuku— and they'd never know.

Shouta excuses himself from Midoriya's side to pick up the phone call from Yagi.

"*Nothing,*" the older hero says, *"All for One claims he's positive he killed Young Bakugou."* As if Shouta needed more confirmation. He feels like punching a wall for the first time in about ten years. Damn it. It doesn't make sense. It would be logical to assume All For One had killed him in his cell, considering the amount of blood in there. Bakugou was strong, but he was a kid, no match for someone like All for One. But that didn't explain the DNA trail leading upstairs. And why was there no corpse *anywhere*?

Could All for One be lying? Could he have somehow planted the DNA himself? The stray possibility of Bakugou having been convinced to join All for One's side lingers like a shadow. Shouta is confident in Bakugou's hero aspirations but… they could have broken his mind, he could have lost hope, he'd already overestimated Bakugou once, it could happen again. Nothing is off the table and it makes Shouta grit his teeth.

"Midoriya is sitting out for the second part of the exam," he says before jumping into a condensed version of what had happened. "Truth be told, I'd have liked him to sit out regardless. The extra stress of a work-study is the last thing he needs right now."

"I agree," replies All Might gravely, "*He's not taking care of himself well —*" The eyebags are hard to miss. *"—this is hitting him hard."*

Shouta sighs.

"We'll have to keep an eye on him."

Chapter End Notes

> so... was it ok? there are lots of interpretations out there of bakuparents and I agree with multiple different ones so this portrayal here is not necessarily how I believe it 100% happened in canon. it's more like one version of them, if that makes sense.

as for izuku, he remains stupid hard to write because I'm used to writing from katsuki's POV lol. but hopefully, I will improve with practice TT the first part of his confrontation with togacamie is pretty much taken from canon.

and the legal stuff, I tried to do research but don't listen to me too much lmaoo I'm a dumbass who talks out of their ass most of the time.

This is probably a chapter I'm gonna come back to edit in the future but for now here it is. We're going back to Katsuki next week and finally finding out what exactly is going on with his aura seeing situation.

Chapter 10: Ghosts and something about the future

Chapter Summary

The plot thickens and Katsuki may have found a new place to belong.

tw// descriptions of violence, specifically an alley fight

Chapter Notes

DJ Khaled voice Another one

TT

chapter 10 weee!!

hello friends. im nervous about this one because a lot of things happen and I hope they're good. i hope the explanation for katsuki's situation makes sense too and I hope you enjoy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He does come back, he comes back the next day and the next and the day after that, always wearing that same dark hoodie and holding himself with that same paranoid care.

His reading habits are always similar too. On the second day, he tries switching spots to one of the study areas in the next hall but returns to the tables of the Q section within the hour. More or less it confirms Noriko's suspicions that he's avoiding getting recognized at all costs, and he must have realized that as few frequenters, as Q has, it was guaranteed to be just him in the area compared to the always at least half-full study halls.

So from that day on Bakugou had shown up every morning, right around opening time, and left at midday, right around lunchtime. She and Hon had kept the whole thing hush hush, not telling any of the other coworkers. Because the kid was just using the public library, something he had as much of a right to do as any other person. They let him be.

But that doesn't mean Noriko refrained from a little bit of innocent snooping. Because she still has many questions and every day

Bakugou further spent at the library only spawns more of them.

The story of his expulsion had broken early in July then snowballed into a country-wide witch hunt of not just him, but other people like him too. It was a very volatile reaction and it appeared to be the boiling point of long bubbling concerns over the underbelly of heroism and hero schools. People and tabloids had been looking for an excuse to talk about that stuff for years, and it just so happened that Bakugou fit all the criteria for media punching bag and messed up at the right time. It was peak unlucky.

Noriko hadn't paid more than a passing sliver's of attention to the situation back when it had been big, but now that she did it was pretty… bad. The articles were critical and the forum and social media posts were much much worse. It was bad enough that Noriko thinks his parents had pretty good odds of suing a bunch of people for cyber-harassment. The tabloids and serious hero news outlets had stopped publishing any articles cold-turkey, almost overnight, at the beginning of August (perhaps due to some behind-the-scenes tampering?) while social media sites took a little longer but got over it eventually too. For a while talks on him fizzled out. Right now, no one really supports the kid, but no one is making posts on him daily either. Still, his reputation is fried. Noriko feels kind of bad.

At least everyone is distracted by All Might being a skeleton.

She's doing a little more research on him (*after* finishing the morning's work, she is semi-responsible) as she waits for lunchtime and stumbles upon an interesting imageboard post.

1 **Anonymous** 03/08/XX 17:50:50 No.76976 +
live in the same neighborhood as that bakugou kid. looks like he's missing. probably got sick of everyone WW
2 **Anonymous** 03/08/XX 17:53:25 No.76977 +
WWWWWWWWW couldn't take the heat huh
134928587.jpg
3 **Anonymous** 03/08/XX 21:48:51 No.76996 +
You're lying. Why isn't it on the news?
4 **Anonymous** 03/08/XX 21:56:23 No.76996 +
beats me. somethin to do with ua

There are a few other posts on a similar wavelength. The idea that Bakugou had run away was not one Noriko had considered, but the dates lined up with Bakugou's sudden disappearance from news sites and tabloids. She can't be sure if the post is real (her eyes shift

towards Bakugou hunched over his book— it would explain his paranoia of being recognized) and if it is, all it does is muddle the waters further. Why would he—

Her phone buzzes. It's a line message.

[Hon Senpai] 11:48

Is Bakugou still there?

[You] 11:48

Yup.

[You] 11:48

reading that useless guide

[Hon Senpai] 11:49

Well, I think you've got the wrong guy.

She frowns. Looks back at Bakugou. He's still reading. He still looks like Bakugou.

[Hon Senpai] 11:49

www.news24.breaking//4775539

[Hon Senpai] 11:50

Because Bakugou Katsuki robbed a bank twenty minutes ago

Her interest shoots up as her eyes widen. He did *what* now? She presses the link so fast her phone might break.

The journalist is standing in front of a burning building. She says the place had been attacked by three villains affiliated with the League of Villains, one that flame guy Dabi, one a monster thing (Nomus were they?), and the other apparently Bakugou. And the evidence is damning. The shots could not be clearer. It's Bakugou and that much is recognizable at a glance. It looks more like Bakugou than the Bakugou ten meters away from her. The reporter says the two disappeared through some sort of slime teleportation quirk after emptying the vault of the bank and lighting it on fire. No casualties.

Noriko blinks faster and faster as she scrolls through the various

articles alight on the trending page. This makes no sense. Who robs a bank in broad daylight?! They'd been all but asking to be filmed. Is it supposed to be some sort of statement? Had she been wrong about the kid in her section being Bakugou? But she's never been wrong, ever, and she's not saying that to brag. It's a fact. W—

"Oi." She jumps, hurrying to switch off the phone. "Does the library card require an ID?"

She stares at him. She hadn't heard him come up to the desk. He's Bakugou. He has to be. Her quirk is recognizing him and his voice as Bakugou. But the Bakugou on that news broadcast also looks like Bakugou. She needs to take off his mask and make sure. She reaches for his face but his hand stops her mid-way. Fuck, what is she doing? He was a hero in training, of course he has combat skills.

"The hell is your problem, lady?" he hisses, knocking her hand away.

"You're Bakugou Katsuki," she says before he can further react, and he stiffens.

"H—"

"How did you rob a bank in Musutafu earlier if you've been here all day?!"

"Rob a—What the fuck are you saying you cotton candy head creep —"

She turns on her phone again and shows him some of the photos from the article she had open. Any protests die in his throat as he snatches the phone and scrolls furiously through her feed, looking like he's very close to losing his grip on reality. Noriko can relate. He puts her phone down after five grueling minutes of silent reading and watches her with a demeanor that's something between ready to run away and weighing the pros and cons of murdering her, hiding the body, and walking out of here with no one the wiser, or maybe blowing the whole library to smithereens for good. Noriko would be intimidated if he didn't seem borderline terrified.

"Are you like… Bakugou's doppelganger or something?"

Her hand is gripping his wrist before he can bolt.

"Are you or not?" she demands.

“I’m not a doppelganger.”

“Evil twin?”

“W—”

“Clone?”

“I’m the real fucking Bakugou Katsuki!” He seems startled by his own too loud admission. They’re lucky P and R sections are also wastelands today. So it *is* him then.

“You’re coming with me,” she says because she needs answers and she needs them *now*. “It’s lunchtime. We’re going to the cafeteria upstairs and talking. Try to run away and I’m turning on the security protocol and ringing the police.”

It’s an ultimatum and she’s the one with the leverage. He doesn’t have a choice really. As they head upstairs she’s struck again by the silence of his footsteps. Like no sound at all. If his breathing wasn’t so irregular right now Noriko would have no way to know he was following her without watching him. Do they teach you how to be a ninja at UA?

The cafe-cafeteria hybrid room is busy enough that they can hide in plain sight, choosing one of the long, window-facing tables to sit at. The waitress is on them in a second.

“This is my cousin from the country,” she explains because the waitress knows her and she’s the type who likes to gossip. Noriko gives Bakugou a look that says “play along” and he grunts. *Good enough*. She gets herself a salad and a bowl of udon, while Bakugou looks queasy even without the bonus factor of food, so he asks for water in a small voice so unlike the one he was using earlier.

Once the waitress has left they both relax, or well, she relaxes and Bakugou looks one percent less constipated.

“I have a lot of questions.”

No response.

“Can you take off your mask?”

Nothing. He’s not even looking at her. He’s staring at the table like it’s a world wonder instead of a slab of plain wood.

“Bakugou-kun?”

They make eye contact and she’s struck by the thought that he’s a kid. Like a proper kid, shit, how old was he? Sixteen? Somehow he looks even younger. He’s reminding Noriko of her youngest sister back home and she wonders, not for the first time, how this guy caused such a big fuss if this is what he’s like. After tugging on his hood firmly he does take the mask off, and yup, he’s got Bakugou Katsuki’s face without question.

“What do you want from me?” The words are harsh but the tone is so tired, it makes Noriko pause. Is she being pushy? Her compulsive need to *know* makes it so she’s not the best with boundaries.

“I want you to explain why you look like Bakugou Katsuki and how you were robbing a bank and reading at the same time.”

He sighs. “I look like Bakugou Katsuki because I am him. The only place I’ve been at today is here. That person at the bank wasn’t me.”

“But he looked like you.”

“I don’t fucking know, okay,” he snaps, “I don’t know anything. Those fucks are villains. Bull crap quirks like cloning and illusions exist. Figure it out yourself,” he mutters this last part, “I haven’t looked like that in a while either.”

He has a point, it could be some quirk effect. “I can’t be sure it isn’t you who’s lying though.”

“I don’t give two shits about what you’re sure about. I don’t even know you.”

Their food arrives. Noriko feels bad looking at her own three bowls compared to Bakugou’s sole sad water bottle. She thinks about offering him some, but his posture screams would rather be dead in a ditch than here, and she imagines he’d react to her offer like a feral alley cat would react to an attempted petting, so she leaves it be. He plays with the plastic wrapper of the water bottle, crinkling it. The cafeteria’s air is thick. Bakugou's eyes are glued to the trees beyond the glass window.

“But why are you in Tokyo? Did you run away? Why would the villains want to have someone pretend to be you?” she says between mouthfuls of food. He sucks in a deep, shaky breath.

“Run away… you could call it that—” He’s very bad at lying. “—and Hands wants to recruit me.”*Who is Hands?* “I make prime villain material. I guess they decided to start my villain career for me. Robbing a bank in broad daylight like I’m some dumbass with worms for brains… Fuck.” Noriko hadn’t known one could do such a thing as take a frustration-induced chug of water, but Bakugou just did. “Twice fucked morons with heads stuck on backward—” It devolves into a one-minute-long muttered rant then Bakugou leans his elbows on the table and puts his head in his hands like Noriko’s ninety-year-old grandfather.

She’s starting to think this kid has some problems.

“Moving on from that, what are you doing in my section of the library?”

He side-eyes her. “Reading.”

Smartass. “You should know that Guide is a waste of time— it uses so much outdated data and is disorganized in general— 'Seiji-sensei’s Quirk Theory Dictionary' is a much better read. I’ve read every book in the section. I know them all by heart. Are you looking for something specific?”

There he goes again, staring at nothing for too long, ruminating over some private thought. “…something happened to my quirk and I’m trying to figure out what.”

Noriko thinks back to her observations on his first appearance. “Is it connected to why you don’t show up on cameras?” He looks surprised by this statement. Huh. “Did you not know? The cameras go all staticky and glitchy whenever you’re on screen.” She makes motions with her hands in an effort to illustrate.

“No, I didn’t know…”

“What if you’re like, a ghost?” Noriko suggests.

“Haah?”

“You are kind of pale and spectral… maybe cameras can’t see you because you’re not really there.”

“Are you five.”

“Twenty-seven actually.”

“Then you should know ghosts aren’t fucking real.”

“There’s no proof of that.”

“There’s no proof that they’re real either,” he counters.

“But—” she cuts herself off, “Look, nevermind. How about this, I’ll get you a library card without an ID and if we get asked we can say your quirk is not appearing on cameras. So you can come back to keep researching and won’t get in trouble. As long as you pass by Hana’s front desk instead of Yukike’s you’ll be fine. Hana’s lazy. She won’t be thorough with validity checks.”

“You have no reason to do that. It’s against the rules too.”

Is he kidding? This is too entertaining. How often does something like this happen to your average librarian?

“Rules.” She scoffs. “You’re technically a robber. Hiding you from the police is much worse than giving you a library card.”

“Yeah, well, you’re doing both.”

Noriko smiles. “Exciting, right?”

“I’m serious,” he says, “you don’t gain shit from this. So why?”

“Because I want to. I know it wasn’t you who robbed that bank because we’ve been ten meters away from each other all day, so as far as I’m concerned you’re a normal kid who may or may not be a ghost. I get bored a lot. You’re interesting. Not many ghosts around these days.”

He opens his mouth as if to say something in protest, but shuts it again mid-way through, biting his lip instead. “Ya swear you won’t rat me out?” She nods, then pretends to zip her lips.

It’s a deal.

When they’d first arrived in Tokyo Katsuki had been positive his life couldn’t get any worse. It’s the second week now and, apparently, it can.

Those League fuckers *had* to go and frame him, because torturing him with fantasies of how good a villain he *could* be wasn’t enough, they had to *show* him too. The saddest part is that whoever masqueraded as

him that day at the bank looked more like him than he did. He looked like Katsuki had looked before that month in the basement. He had his muscles and agility and everything. It's been three more weeks and Katsuki has barely gotten back three-quarters of his lost body weight. Now he has to worry about getting arrested on top of that.

At the very least healer hag had been very accommodating. She didn't even watch the news, just said he should be careful and that was that. Katsuki envies her lack of nerves.

Streetlamps flicker on as dusk settles over the horizon. He stayed at the library a bit later than usual today. He and that blue cotton candy-haired librarian (C*all me Riko!*) who insists on helping him haven't made much progress yet, but Katsuki will agree that she is a huge time-saver, since she remembers every book in the quirk section front to back in the literal sense. Memory Machine seems to view him as a bit of a pet project or walking freakshow, which, while not the nicest, is not an unfamiliar feeling, and as long as she's useful he can't bring himself to complain.

After all, he'd been the one who fucked up and got himself recognized anyway, the fact that she's an utter weirdo and hasn't turned him in yet (plus convinced the senpai she spilled the beans to to do the same) is in of itself a miracle. Beggars can't be choosers, that's something Katsuki has had to grapple a lot with as of late. He'd been so out of it after seeing those pictures of *his* body doing weird shit that he'd told her way too much in the aftermath too. Just another fuck-up to add to the long list of fuck-ups.

He's grateful for this path from the shop to the library since it's more secluded and winds through abandoned residential areas, which are far quieter than the bustling main street. Perhaps it's that calm, mixed with the low comfortable hum of the night that lures Katsuki into a false sense of security, and, as he passes a juncture in the neighborhood where houses connect to the bars and restaurants of the next block, he finds himself cornered by two figures.

They're drunk is the first thing he notices. The sweet tang of alcohol tints the air and their movements are slowed to a comical degree, limbs loose.

"Little boy," slurs the high voice of a woman, the aura around her sharp. She hiccups. "Aren't you pretty? Got any cash on ya?"

"No," Katsuki says firmly. Another reason this route is less frequented

is that abandoned buildings don't exactly attract the top crop of society. He's run across harmless people down on their luck, homeless people, societal rejects, plenty of drunks. He knows the best thing to do is walk away.

"No?" she mocks as the man with her squints his dilated brown eyes at him. The matter around him is almost bubble-like. "Oh don't be like that! You gotta have something! Come have fun with us!"

"Nope, not doing that. Fuck off, lady."

She does not fuck off, opting instead to lay a bony hand on Katsuki's shoulder. It's cold and Katsuki shrugs it off on instinct, a bit more violent than could be considered friendly. The woman's expression sobers and crumbles into disgust, wisps of red hair framing her face like a fire. Her fingers roll into a fist, and before he knows it he's been punched straight to the face.

He's embarrassed to say the impact makes white spots dance in his vision, and her next hit has him falling against the brick wall of the alley. He clutches at his stinging cheek and tries to regain his bearings as he looks up at her lamp illuminated form. Her aura gathers around her fists.

"Makiiii-chan—" says the man, who's yet to do anything but watch. "—don't pick fights with random kids. He says he doesn't have anything."

The woman, Maki (?) ignores him, continuing to look down on Katsuki, pale face flushed red on the cheeks. "Think you're tough shit pretty boy? He has a face, doesn't he? Let's have a look at it."

The hand comes to grab below his chin, and as he tries to fight back, Katsuki is struck by how strong her grip is, or perhaps how weak his own body has become. He's lifted up. Her fingernails dig into the side of his face as the hood of his sweatshirt falls backward. The glare of the streetlamp seems harsher than before.

"Red eyes… hmm, off white hair, better if it was white—" she counts off and Katsuki hates feeling like he's some livestock to be traded, but her fingers have grown reflective, and he realizes her quirk must be a literal iron grip. From this close, he can smell the sake in her breath. Drunk people are dangerous. They're unpredictable. He swears at her and she laughs an oily laugh. "What a mouth on you!"

Her partner tugs on the fabric of her green form-fitting dress. He's

more flushed than her, looks like he's barely holding himself up in the first place. "He looks a little like that kid the League is lookin' for doesn't he?" Katsuki feels like someone's dumped a bucket of ice-cold water on him. *Fucking fuck*. Of fucking course they're looking for him too.

Maki stares at the guy, as if it's taking a while for her brain to process that information, then she turns to look at him and her painted lips twist into a smirk. "He looks a lot like that kid. He might be that kid. How much do ya think they'd pay to have him back?"

The mere thought of having to go back *there* sends an ugly shiver down Katsuki's spine. He musters strength out of somewhere and kicks her in the gut, startling her into releasing her grip and dropping him. Katsuki's no stranger to street fights. His battle sense didn't come out of the void. She stumbles back, clutching her head and abdomen, and that seems to piss the man off a lot, considering he has decided to lunge at Katsuki wielding a book-sized brick. This is why he hates drunk people.

"How dare you touch Macchan!" he yells, making to strike Katsuki with the brick. His unstable legs betray him though, and he hits way off mark, barreling into the wall. The brick clatters to the floor and a chunk of it breaks off. The man recovers quickly, and his torso beneath his shirt has puffed to resemble a pool float or a life jacket. Katsuki tries to get him with a right hook, but the skin his fist connects with is bouncy, and he doesn't think the lack of damage has anything to do with Katsuki's own weakened body.

"It's my quirk," the guy cackles, "I can blow up my skin like an airbag. Good luck hurting me kid!"

Motherfucker. Katsuki's growls, frustrated as the bubbly aura around the man begins to obscure the surface of his shirt. For a moment he almost wills his palm to ignite, forgetting Explosion is long gone. The thought it a sour one. Katsuki grabs the shirt fabric instead, intent on sending the guy crashing down and wishing he could touch the damn bubbles and get them to go away. Just as he's about to flip the man to the ground, he hears something fizz. The hand that's gripping the shirt, wrist deep in the man's aura —it tingles. Then, all of a sudden, it feels like it's dipped in a soapy acid pool and it *stings*.

The guy looks from Katsuki's face to his hand in frantic motions, confused by what's going on. Katsuki lets go of the man's shirt, instead opening his fist in one rapid move to scatter the bits of aura around it

and alleviate the sting. Blood bursts from somewhere and the man *screams*. It's such a shrill scream that Maki, who has recovered and is poised to attack, freezes midway.

Katsuki lets the guy go, and as quick as that fuzzy feeling was there it's gone, leaving only faint prickles. His hand is dripping with red, and the man's shirt is soaked, the skin underneath it deflated and bleeding. The alley smells of iron. What the fuck was that?!

Katsuki stares at his hand as the man moans and flails on the floor, looking as confused and terrified as him. "Get away!" he cries, inching a hand into puffy hair and pulling, desperate. "What did you do to my quirk?! What the fuck did you do to it?!"

He doesn't know. Katsuki doesn't fucking know. He didn't do anything. He hadn't known he could even touch auras, or that scattering them would do anything, much less *that*.

"You heard his damn question!" He avoids Maki's hardened fist by a hair's breath and takes the chance to jam two extended fingers right into her green eyes, smearing her face with blood. Fuck fighting clean. She recoils, cursing, and Katsuki takes the chance to run, sprinting through the eerily lit neighborhood. It's a testament to how often fights break out around these parts that no one is batting an eye at the commotion, and what few people there are lining the streets continue on their merry way with heads down. The sky has darkened to charcoal.

Katsuki turns into a narrow pass between houses and crouches, obscuring himself from the main street. His heart hammers in his chest as he feels Maki pause in the street beside him. "Come back here you little shit," she calls.

It's only after he can't hear her steps anymore that Katsuki leaves out the other side of the pass and into the crowded street, trying his best to blend in and and not allowing himself to relax until he's made it ho — to the shop.

The main shop room's lights are turned off, and once inside he makes sure to stay as silent as possible, tip toeing into the bathroom to wash the blood off his hands and mend the cuts on his face leftover from the woman's ring. The blood tints the sink's porcelain and its scent makes Katsuki queasy. He scrubs until scarred skin is crimson and raw for a different reason, using what must be a quarter of the hand soap in the process. He props open the little bathroom window to freshen

the air, then turns to the cabinet to grab some disinfectant for the cuts on his face. They are, as luck would have it, quite minor, so two simple bandaids will suffice. His left cheek looks a bit swollen and will likely continue to swell while he sleeps, so he'll have to nab some ice from the freezer to put on it.

With that thought he turns around, opening the bathroom door, only to be met with a very pissed off looking Koharu.

"What *are* you doing, pray tell?"

Katsuki feels a reflexive need to jump on the defensive. "Fucking nothing… I—"

"'Fucking nothing.'" Her face is flat. Her tone is flat. It's not a question. "This 'nothing' made you bleed enough to need five minutes to wash it away."

"I didn't wash shit."

"Right, that's why I could hear the tap from the other room and there are still droplets of red on the sink." Katsuki whips his head down to see that there are indeed droplets of red running down the side of the sink, likely there because he hadn't been the gentlest with his scrubbing and in his daze he'd forgotten to wipe down anything but the top and bowl of the basin. Damn it.

"It wasn't my blood!" he says then, as if that makes it any better.

Gold eyes peer into him and eyebrows arch. "Did you get into a fight?"

"It wasn't a big deal," Healer hag has the unique ability of making him feel like a scolded five year old in an instant. "I was coming home from the library and some assholes cornered me. I fought them off."

"Injuries?"

"Nothing major."

"And you didn't start it?" she questions, suspicious.

"Fuck no, what do you think I am, a kindergartner?!" That seems to satisfy her, and she turns away, coughing into the back of her hand. Katsuki will never say it, but he's grateful for how she trusts him enough to believe him despite what his personality is like.

“I’ve told you a dozen times to use the main street boy, you’re going to give me a heart attack one of these days,” she chastises as she walks back to the living room, “I don’t know what your problem with people is but you aren’t exactly the strongest as of now, not strong enough to pass through the rougher routes with a hundred percent safety. You’re lucky that’s the first fight you’ve gotten into—”

Katsuki grits his teeth, but he knows she’s right. Those two being drunk was the only reason he’d gotten away, that and whatever happened to Puffy Jacket’s quirk. Katsuki’s physical state is still frail, he’s rusty in his movements, and he doesn’t have a quirk to fall back on. He’s, when you strip it down, about as vulnerable as middle school Deku had been. He’s been slacking on the training side of recovery for too long. He’ll have to change his fighting style to suit his new quirklessness. He’s gonna need to be able to hold his own again when Healer Hag has had enough and kicks him out.

“—and I expect it to be your last. Please be careful. Now, come help with dinner—”

The mention of dinner makes Katsuki aware of the scent of burnt food leaking from the kitchen. Koharu coughs. It’s a wonder she’s taken care of herself on her own for so long.

“—I burnt the gyoza,” she finishes, the earlier stern demeanor replaced by sheepishness.

“Fuck,” Katsuki says, running a still wet hand through his hair. “Wait healer hag—”

“I know I said you can call me anything but at least say healer grandma or healer lady or—”

He cuts her off, “The main body of the shop, it’s in a safe place, right?”

Koharu’s eyes narrow. “No one has found it in four decades. It’s off the grid. Is this about the people looking for you?” When Katsuki is too guilty to reply she gets the message, letting the topic drop. “Anyway, come make dinner before I manage to burn the soup too.”

“You’re so selfish Kacchan, don’t you think?”

That’s what the Deku who haunts his dreams tells him every night.

“Assistant! Come over here!” calls Koharu from the main shop room.

Katsuki frowns, first because he’s not her damn assistant, and second because she *never* asks him to come to the main shop room while there’s a client in there. In fact, she’s always insisted he stay as far away as possible, a paranoia that only increased when she found out the police were looking for him. So this, this is weird.

He grabs one of the spare patterned masks hanging by the door that connects the shop to the rest of the house and fixes it over his face, the restriction in everything it brings not welcome but necessary. He shrugs on his hood and walks into the shop room, only to find the floor covered in a thick layer of… gum balls…?

Their odor is sickly sweet and Koharu looks a little lost, glued next to who must be the client, a seedy guy with pink eyes and grey skin and spheres of gum extruding from his fingers. His aura is, like you might expect, the texture of bubble-gum, except it seems chewed up, and the mass of it concentrated around his hand is physically split from the thin film surrounding the rest of his body.

“I need you to bring the bucket, a trash bag, and two pairs of non-stick gloves,” Koharu instructs, “and make it quick!”

Katsuki returns with the things, using the gloves meant for him as towels more than gloves (the thought of wearing them makes him break out in shivers). Picking up on what’s going on, he nudges the guy’s hands, which are still producing gumballs, into the bucket, so whatever he makes falls in there. Then he hands Koharu her own gloves and starts collecting the scattered gum into the trash bag. Healer hag is giving the client what looks like glucose syrup tablets and sugar cubes. Judging by the pallor of his skin, his blood-sugar has gone down. Could be a result of prolonged quirk usage, Katsuki guesses.

“Toyomitsu-san, I don’t think you’re being honest with me,” Koharu says, “It’s near impossible for a quirk to behave like this of its own accord. You insist that you don’t know what could’ve triggered this? That nothing strange has happened throughout this week and it began with no warning in the morning?”

Gumball Machine shakes his head, but at least has the decency to appear guilty. There’s this loopy look on his face, like he’s pretending to have no idea what’s going on, and it annoys Katsuki to no end. It would be obvious to even a toddler that this guy is lying.

“Then I can’t help you. My observations tell me this is not a natural reaction while you insist otherwise. If that’s the case, I can’t do anything, and would recommend you find another quirk doctor—”

“No, no, please.” He’s gone impossibly paler. “I— I was at a party with some friends yesterday— and we— someone had brought along some Spike, and I— I had a bit!”

There it is. Spike is a quirk-enhancing drug, think the milder, baby cousin of Trigger. It’s far less potent and therefore cheaper and openly available in shadier areas, though still illegal above of medical dosages. It’s popular for its short term side-effect as a hallucinogen and low rate of addiction. Katsuki remembers some of his dumber classmates playing around with it, back in middle school.

Even through the mask, Katsuki can recognize what he’s come to call Koharu’s *you stupid child* stance. “Was that so hard?” The poor bastard deflates, continuing to munch on sugar cubes. “It must’ve not been compatible with your body and quirk. I’m afraid you’re going to have to wait until it leaves your system by itself or head to a hospital to get it flushed out.”

“No way!” Gumball whines, “That could get me arrested.”

“That is a result you should have considered when you did something illegal. You youngins are always thinking you can play smart with drugs. Spike may be harmless to ninety percent of people, but it can take two days for your body to purge it naturally and do away with its after-effects. There’s a reason it’s banned while things like Q-plus aren’t.”

He bows his head, resigned to his fate of shitting out gumballs from his fingertips and being on the constant verge of quirk exhaustion for the next two days. Katsuki, who’s by now gathered all the stray pink gummies littering the floor, watches how the mass of aura gum around his hand inflates and shrinks with each gumball released.

He’d figured out after that fight in the alley that what he’s been seeing are quirks, some kind of manifestation of quirk energy or quirk factor he hadn’t heard of before. It sounds far-fetched, but there’s no other explanation for what he did to that guy in the alley. Katsuki remembers wishing he could push those bubbles away then being able to feel them for the first time, plus the way touching them had had a physical effect on Puffer Jacket Man’s quirk. Maybe… looking at the visible split in the client’s aura… maybe he can do the same thing

here.

For a moment he hesitates, remembering what had happened to the other, *only* other dude he'd tried this with. But that hesitation is quelled as fast as it appeared. He's never been one to back down from a challenge, and this might be the perfect chance to confirm for good that what he's seeing are indeed quirks.

He comes up to Gumball Machine and peers at him through the mask. "I could try something," he says in a voice different from his usual speaking tone, ignoring Koharu's confused gaze he can feel searing into his skin.

Gumball grows apprehensive at him. "It might fix me?"

Katsuki nods.

"Sure, go ahead and try."

Now that he's got the guy's consent, Katsuki zeroes in on the aura around his hands and, running on intuition alone, decides mending the cut-off bit of the aura will probably fix the problem. Trouble is, he tries to touch the gummy substance but his hand phases through, like it always has. He frowns and holds back strings of curses as the same thing happens again and again and again.

"Uh… what are you doing? Um— has he— is he okay or?" Gumball asks Koharu and Katsuki really feels like kicking him before he remembers that they can't see the auras and from an outsider's perspective it looks like he's been poking at thin air for five minutes.

"Assistant you might—"

"Shut up," he snaps, a frustrated flush rising its way up his neck. Now that Katsuki's announced this to the world he *needs* it to work. He tries to recall the exact feeling of wishing to be able to touch the aura in that alley, tries to project that desire into his fingers, to imagine the sticky texture of the gum and what it would feel like to sink into it.

Gumball jerks in his seat as the gummy aura finally begins to stick to Katsuki's skin. Touching it burns, but not to an unbearable degree. "I felt something! Is it— is it working?" Katsuki ignores him, focusing instead on stretching the gum to bridge the gap. It's not too difficult a task, since it seems to like sticking to itself. The hard part is joining as much as possible as fast as possible since the contact hurts. A minute or so later he's got the last part connected, and he removes his fingers,

allowing the aura to level itself out.

“Try turning it off now,” Katsuki says and watches the guy’s mouth shift into a gape when his quirk does indeed turn off.

“That’s amazing! Do the other— oh my god!”

The other hand is much easier, now that Katsuki has a feel for this particular aura it takes half the time to establish the connection and even less to mend the gap. Gumball turns off his quirk on that hand too and cracks his knuckles, relief flooding his posture. He discusses the details of payment with Koharu, who gives him advice on what other similar drugs to avoid based on his aversion to Spike.

“You’re a savior, man!” he says as he’s leaving. Katsuki flinches as he claps him on the shoulder in a friendly way that reminds him with a pang of Kirishima. “I promise to keep the details a secret, but I’ll put in good words for this place. I don’t know how to repay you!”

“Don’t do dumb shit,” Katsuki replies simply, and the guy laughs, mumbling some words in agreement followed by a goodbye.

Katsuki watches Gumball crouch through the tiny door and disappear, very much aware of the weight of Koharu’s stare on his back. He’s got some explaining to do and he’s not looking forward to it.

Iki Koharu is a woman of patience when it comes to people at least. Born into a long line of esteemed doctors but lacking her family’s signature quirk, she’d been often cast to the side as a child. What’s more, her own quirk was a pesky mix of her father’s space enlarging quirk and her mother’s healing golden blood that took years to master even at the beginner level.

She’s familiar with waiting and spite to an intimate degree, which is why she’d had no problem staying under her family’s oppressive wing until she’d learned all their doctoring secrets and piloted projects of her own, until she’d made enough headway and connections in the business to start her own shop and upstage all of her boastful cousins and siblings. Years of running the shop and discovering that she enjoys helping people in need more than getting back at her family, who’d never accepted her in the first place, mellowed out that competitive spirit. But the patience stayed.

In fact, you could argue said patience is both her greatest strength and her critical weakness. Koharu is great at healing patients in the

analytical sense, but in establishing a human connection? Not so much. She's a firm believer in live and let live for most situations, which is why she'll serve people who commit minor crimes or vigilantes with no problem. She doesn't ask questions. She trusts that, when given a choice, most will do the right thing. She trusts that people will be honest when it's necessary.

She doesn't pry, until, often, it's too late.

Looking at this boy who has been living under her roof for months yet whose exact circumstances she knows too little about, Koharu thinks that she's been too lenient.

"Katsuki," she starts and he freezes mid-escape. "It's long overdue… we need to have a talk, boy."

She can't see his expression under the mask, but his posture resembles that of a wounded animal wanting in desperation to keep their secrets under lock and key. Koharu remembers the ashen, dead pallor of his skin as he sat against the glass of that phone booth in Kamino, ankle-deep in flood water so saturated in blood it appeared black, a hole straight through his torso and innumerable wounds everywhere else. For all intents and purposes, this child should be dead. Even Koharu's last stores of her mother's blood should've not been enough to revive him.

But thanks to some miracle and a dozen called in favors from healer siblings Koharu didn't want to see, he'd lived. He'd lived and recovered far better than Koharu could've expected, considering he could still somewhat use the thumb that had its nerves ripped clean.

That should've been the first red flag.

It was obvious enough that he'd been through something horrible, and she always felt that he needed a lot more help than she could give him, particularly in the mental health department. But he was as hardheaded as a brick and didn't seem to understand why anyone would want to aid him (he'd all but began working as a live-in cleaner to pay her back for staying here), so she had to tread delicately around him. She'd never been wary around him though, no matter what the news reported. The version of him she'd met was fine from that very first day in the alley.

"Help me close up first," she says, switching the sign on the door to 'closed' and removing her face mask. Katsuki follows her like a lost prickly puppy as they place the various trinkets she used for the

previous client back where they belong. He doesn't talk or grumble, performing every task with careful efficiency. Koharu can feel the nerves rolling off him in waves. *Long overdue for sure.*

It doesn't take long to reorder everything, and soon she's slid the screens of the shop closed and they're in the living room, sitting opposite each other under the kotatsu.

"You're going to tell me everything, how you got expelled, what happened before I came to get you at the phone booth, your issue with the League, how you fixed Mr. Toyomitsu's quirk earlier—" she tries to make herself sound as stern as possible. "—everything, with no omissions."

So he tells her. About the expulsion and the kidnapping and the experimentation sessions and the League of Villains. She's ill and very angry by the end of it, even years of operating in medical circles will never prepare her for such stories. She doesn't press him for details on his stay there, both for his sake and hers, instead focusing on how he escaped. He seems surprised when she shows herself familiar with All For One.

"He's notorious. Has been around since forever," she reveals. Healing quirks are rare, so big parts of her family have always had targets on their backs. "In my great-grandparents' generation, he practically ran Japan, and was the leading authority on quirks before the rise of the HPSC. Makes sense, with a quirk like that. I had no idea he's still up and kicking."

"Well, he came into my cell and said some bullshit about stories," continues Katsuki, "then ranted about how he'd make me a superweapon— crap like that— and shoved his palm in my face and tried to do *something*. I don't know, it felt like a huge pull? Like he was pulling me. So I tugged back and then I was floating until he stabbed me with this dark spiky thing, and started complaining about me being a 'dud'. The fucker looked freaked. That's when I started seeing this quirk shit. He left after, said there was 'no time'. He thought the stab would kill me."

Koharu feels herself blanch. "So you walked from under the factory to the phone booth with the hole in your abdomen?!"

"It hurt like hell and I was bleeding all over when he left—" He hesitates. "—but I knew it wasn't enough to kill me, so I figured I could try to get out, and I did. I just wanted to make it out of there

before I—" Another pause. "calling you was a last-minute decision."

This is worse than she'd thought. He'd called her convinced he'd die before she even got there. He *did die* before she'd gotten there.

"I'm not going to lie to you, Katsuki, I have no idea how you're alive. Your pulse was gone when I found you yet you were resuscitated so easily…"

Katsuki cracks the joints of his hands. "Well, like I said I— I've been able to see…shit around people since All For One stabbed me. They're like auras, or bits of matter floating around, and it's different for everyone. I think— nah, I *know* it's quirks. I can't usually touch them, they're like holograms. I first interacted with one during that fight in the alley, then I thought I could try again today."

That's. That's a lot of information. Well. Wow. "You said you can *see* quirks?"

He's staring at his knuckles laid on his lap. "Fuck's it called, quirk factors? That shit."

She thinks for a moment too long and then: "Okay."

"You believe me?!"

"It does kind of make sense. All For One tried to take your quirk or give you one, and you fought back. My guess is it ripped your consciousness from your body and got you stuck between the regular plane of existence and the one where quirk factors are visible." A cough breaks itself from her frail lungs. She clears her throat. "Quirk energy can be measured, so it *is* there. And you can… see it, I suppose." If she sounds like she doesn't believe it, it's because she hasn't processed it yet.

Katsuki considers her answer. "So I'm not a ghost."

"A ghost? Who put that idea in your head?"

"The reason I've been going to the library is to figure out what happened to me, and my quirk. There's this nerd librarian there helping me, and she insists I'm a ghost, because I make cameras go haywire." He scowls.

Koharu frowns at that, the possible implication of Katsuki's situation nagging at her, begging to make them both uncomfortable. Her gaze

lingers on his right finger. No way that assumption of hers is true. That would be borderline fantasy. She shakes her head, dispelling the thought. “Dear child, if you were having problems you thought were quirk-related, why are you wasting time at the library instead of asking the licensed quirk doctor you live with?”

Katsuki flushes. “I thought you’d think I was a lunatic.”

“Nonsense, this explains so much. If only you’d been honest from the beginning.” Koharu doesn’t follow up on that, considering she had also insisted on not prying.

“The quirk aura shit sounded too far-fetched. I was expecting something more…”

“Clear-cut science?” He nods. “It’s a common misconception people have about quirks. That they’re a product of human evolution and that they’ll always follow scientific rules when both those things are only half true. Evolution in the old sense of the word would imply the quirks made humans more likely to survive in their environment, but quirks don’t adhere to that rule. We don't know the origin of quirks. There’s no real logical line of evolution that would bring about my space quirk as necessary for survival, never mind that some quirks are not based on organic structures at all. You'll see people with car-like engines for body parts and fire-hydrants for heads when those are man-made things."

“So you’re saying quirk science is bullshit?”

“Well, I wouldn't go that far. Quirks do follow some vague old-school biological, chemical, and physical laws, but the simple truth is that if you were to introduce quirks to a scientist from back when the world was quirkless, they’d consider quirks a pseudoscience. For example, my own quirk bends the old laws of time and space, or it’s common that quirks that are supposedly based on chemical reactions don’t end up balanced.”

“I had a classmate like that. Used her ‘lipids’ to make shit. That shit would mean she somehow has the equivalent of a particle accelerator in her *skin*. Plus she could make a whole ass canon and barely lost weight. I always thought there was no way she had enough lipids for that. It used to drive me crazy. “

“Well, she probably didn’t,” Koharu says, “because our study of quirks may be based on the old sciences, but the quirk factor itself is a far more abstract concept, and in quirk scientist circles it’s been theorized

for decades that what keeps quirks going is an entirely different type of energy called quirk energy. We can measure it but not see it. Well, everyone but you…" It's fascinating, she must admit. "Say, what does my quirk look like?"

"It's like— " His face twists. "— this neon yellow goop, with little cubes of blood red suspended inside. And they… close in on each other? Think those impossible shapes and illusions."

Interesting. It matches her quirk's description fairly well, ability to connect spaces using her blood. The researcher in her ignites. Quirk scientists have been searching and failing in finding a way to see the energy of the quirk factor for centuries, and here it, or rather he is, fallen right onto her doorstep. This boy… this boy might just be the only person in recorded history to have successfully fought back against and repelled All For One's quirk.

"You gonna kick me out, healer hag?"

But right now, all he is is a boy, a boy who's been through too much, looking small and unsure of his future against the colorful bookcase of the living room. Koharu realizes he's taken her silence to mean something else.

"Of course not." The truth is, she's grown fond of him. Koharu has never felt the need to find a partner or make a family; she's a particular person and needs a lot of space. But having Katsuki around has not been unpleasant. He's more than pulled his own weight and maybe someone else in the house makes the quiet diners a touch less lonely.

Koharu has owed debts to people before, has handed out her card before, has treated patients like Katsuki before. She's never grown attached to them though, not like this. Not only is this boy fascinating and equipped with a will of steel, he flips on the grandmother switch Koharu never knew she had. She's grown soft in her old age. There's no way she could throw this child back into the streets (she knows he still has no intention of going back to his family, much less now that he's a wanted criminal) even if his injuries are long healed.

"How about," she suggests, "you become my real assistant?" She holds up a hand to pause his protests before they even start. "I'm getting old, I can't run everything on my own anymore. And that situation of yours could be very useful for a quirk doctor. You're smart enough, and I could teach you all the trade secrets. You could practice

observation and interaction with quirks on patients too. And I'll pay you, seventy percent for every client you treat and a flat wage based on work hours. It'll be much higher than those part-time jobs you teenagers do these days."

He's a good, competent kid and she needs someone to take over some of her duties. It would be a waste to let this place —her life's work— rot when she can't take care of it anymore.

Katsuki gapes, and Koharu can see the conflict in his stance, the way he's both melted in relief and is trying to hide it. He gulps.

"You don't have to accept right away. Think about it. It's an offer that's on the table."

"Fuck— I— okay," and then quieter, barely there, "I'll let you know."

She never had any intention of letting him go.

Chapter End Notes

a lot of things to note now:

1) most of the new ocs in this will be throwaways, so don't worry about them taking over the story

2) to clear up something with the dates, this chapter happens in October, while the last one actually happened in September. I've placed the licensing exam somewhere around mid-September. It probably would have been an easier timeline to follow if I'd put the Mitsuki chapter between the two Limbo chapters because chronologically that's where it's supposed to be, but since I'm a dumbo clown I didn't do that. apologies for the confusion. I'll post a full timeline for part one of the story with dates in the notes of the next chapter.

3) the formatting for the forum posts is taken from this anon image board called 2chan or futaba. it's basically Japanese 4chan. the WWWW is like the equivalent of hahaha or lolololol

3) I have no idea what to do with the honorifics. Because some of them do have English versions (think -san = Mrs/Mr) they're not used in the same way. you'll often have students in class calling same-aged friends with -san but if I translated it like "Hello Mr.Midoriya," said Yaoyorozu. "Good day Ms.Yaoyorozu." it comes off as strange in English. But then the honorifics do give

important information on character relationships/closeness/ personality (for example Todoroki doesn't use honorifics with any of his friends, while Iida uses -kun for everyone even though it's most often used for boys (he even says Tsuyu-chan-kun which XD to accommodate both her preference for first names and his own standard formality) while Tsuyu uses -chan for everyone even though it's seen as kiddie/affectionate (she calls Bakugou something like Baku-chan I think)). I didn't know how to balance that so please tell me if you have any recommendations/thoughts on what makes reading easier and more natural.

4) Quirk Energy is based on Quirk Levels we've seen measured in one of the movies. All Might's quirk levels were 15,000AP at their peak and 2,500AP now. I sorta took that idea and ran with it. The quirk factor in canon refers to the quirk itself plus the biological component that allows it to function (as per the BNHA wiki) and I've added this aura/ energy aspect to it.

5) Thought it was interesting that Koharu's quirk was born because of a combo of parents with canonically rare quirks (regeneration - healing blood and warping - her dad's space quirk)

6) Fight scenes are hard as hell. I hope the action turned out smooth and I'm hoping to make them more varied and interesting in the future.

7) Next week's chapter, and the final one of part one of the story, the first half of its title is "Walking home to you" and I am incredibly hyped for it. Props to anyone who can guess what it's gonna be about.

Chapter 11: Interlude: Happy Death Day

Chapter Summary

Katsuki lights a car on fire and gets himself a death certificate.

Chapter Notes

Right so... I know I said this chapter would be called walking home to you but it kinda spiraled out of control and ended up being like 14k words so I figured i'd be better off splitting it up. i hope you enjoy it regardless this chapter was fun but so so difficult. remember the crack treated seriously lol and enjoy this 8k of tried bamf Katsuki with a few glimpses of Masaru

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What will you do?

What does making up mean?

Is this being self-serving?

If you'd told Katsuki of a year ago that come mid-October he'd be crouching in the aisles of a stationery store in Tokyo looking for papers and envelopes to buy instead of kicking ass and destroying everyone at UA he'd have probably blown your face off.

That doesn't change the fact though, that crouching in the aisles of a stationery store in Tokyo is exactly what he's doing. He needs letter supplies (for some reason Koharu only has medicine bags) and fitting everything in the last 1000¥ he'd had leftover from the pockets of his pre-kidnapping pants is proving to be a challenge. He wants to get this over with as soon as possible so he can get to the library and return some shit too. People, other customers, walk by him, conversing in hush tones. He's not a fan of the crowded space but a big chain store like this with hundreds of shoppers daily makes for much slimmer chances of being recognized than a local office supply store, so he keeps his head down and chooses another sheet of paper.

be my assistant.

That's what she'd said two days ago. He scoffs. Healer hag is crazy. Yeah, she's known him for a good few months now (which is in of

itself insane because has it *really* been that long?!) but to suggest that sort of thing? It almost feels too convenient. Too good to be true. And is it what he wants? Is he saying yes (that's eighty-six percent what he's saying) because he wants to or because the other options well, suck? He can't make that sort of decision without knowing exactly what healer hag is looking for in an assistant and without considering all the responsibilities. They need to discuss shit again.

He browses through the plain papers and perhaps it's due to his newfound inability to get comfortable anywhere that the tail end of a conversation a few meters away catches on his ears.

"May I help you?" Judging by the voice, it's an older man speaking.

"Uh. Who… you?" And the person replying sounds like a kid. They don't appear to know Japanese very well and their speech is thickly accented.

"An employee. You seem a little lost."

"Work… here?"

"Yes." It's a fairly standard conversation but Katsuki can't help but feel that something in the guy's tone is… off.

"Ah!" The kid sounds happy about it. "I, um… where f-fountain pen? Manga f-fountain pen?"

"You mean manga inking sets?" Katsuki can almost hear the smile in his voice.

"Yes!"

"They'll be downstairs. I can show you if you want." Katsuki frowns. He could've sword the plans of the place he looked at when he came in said the pens were on floors five and six. They're on floor two right now. The only things he saw on the first floor were the café and the souvenir shop for tourists.

"But big sis… is waiting café."

"Don't worry about it. You'll have the pens you're looking for before your sister notices a thing. They're ten minutes away, tops." Okay, major red flag. Why the fuck is Katsuki invested in this?

A group of women brushes past him, interrupting his grasp on the

conversation for a moment, and once they've left and he can turn around, he scans the area for the two people he'd been eavesdropping on. They're on the move, snaking through the shelves.

His gut tells Katsuki something is wrong, so he stands and follows, making sure to pause occasionally to keep himself from appearing suspicious. Some part of him wants to confront the guy outright, but he can't do that yet because a) he's kind of a wanted criminal, b) the guy might be a store worker for real and Katsuki's lost it, and c) he's got no idea what the guy's quirk or power level is.

The aura around him, a sparkling, rosy mist, and the flower bud adorned hair make for an unobtrusive appearance. The kid meanwhile looks to be about the size of a ten-year-old and has short, brown hair. They're surrounded by a faint, sandy cloud. Nothing out of the ordinary and yet…

Katsuki keeps tailing, ducking into shelves from time to time, adjusting his tote with the books in it, and tugging on the mask covering his face. When the guy steers them towards the emergency exit instead of the actual stairs, Katsuki decides he's had enough and speaks up.

"Hey, you."

The guy stutters to a halt and turns to look at Katsuki with one of the fakest smiles he's ever seen. He's got a hand on the kid's shoulder and its grip seems to tighten.

The "Excuse me, this is an employees-only section—" he utters doesn't line up with his prior "I'm taking you to to the fountain pens." Katsuki's eyes narrow and even the kid looks up at Flower Head with a puzzled expression.

"You know this guy, kid?" Katsuki asks, ignoring him for now. The kid stares at Katsuki with bright brown eyes and shakes their head no. Flower Bouquet backs further and further into the emergency exit then his demeanor seems to do a one-eighty.

"No no, she's my niece. She just doesn't speak Japanese well and loves to play around y'see?" he says as the kid stares at him and his overenthusiastic gesticulation in bewilderment. Does he expect Katsuki to buy this drivel? "I'm taking her to a special manga section out back. I could get into real trouble with the manager if anyone else finds out. But she visits so little, you know? Do a guy a solid and keep it a secret—"

“Not niece. I’m boy,” the kid says and Flower Head’s jaw goes a little slack midsentence.

“Uh… it’s been a really long time y—”

Katsuki punches him.

The kid gasps and flinches out of his grasp, while Flower Head himself stumbles back, wiping at his newly split lip with his knuckles.

“Damn it…” The mask has dropped. “Who do you think you are, some sort of hero?” Flower Head says, and the split second of disorientation that the last word causes Katsuki gives him enough time to flood the area with a puff of pink pollen that glues Katsuki’s eyelids shut.

And when he says glues them shut, he means it literally. They won’t open.

Isn’t he wearing a mask? How did he breathe that shit in? What the hell?

shuts Katsuki’s eyes and he can’t blink them open again

Nope. Not this. Not now. He shakes his head and tries to feel the air in front of him for where Flower Head might be, getting ready to speak when he inhales another vaguely sweet something, and this time it’s his mouth that’s zipped closed.

Nothing but muffled “mnghs” will come out and he curses to himself. *What the fuck sorta quirk is this?!*

He stumbles around like a headless dumbass, attempting to stay close to the walls and use them as a guide, but with nothing but sound and touch to back him up, it’s not going too well. Katsuki hears the noise of a door click shut and then a whimper that might be the kid. A hand comes to touch his shoulder and push him forward *nothing more than a puppet on strings* and he barely manages to regain his footing in time to stop himself from tripping down what he assumes must be the emergency stairs. He swats at the air with his tote. When the hand comes back, he tries to latch on it and turn towards the source, jabbing his own hands out and hoping to hit something.

“Ouch!” *That’s fucking right* . He thinks he might have poked Flower Head right in the eyes.

But the victory is short-lived because he inhales again and the air

whooshes out of his lungs the next second as his *nose pinches itself shut* . He can't fucking breathe. Fuck. He's gonna die.

"See I didn't wanna have to do that but you wouldn't quit being annoying."

He tries everything, tries to cough, to heave, to roll his eyes or blink, but nothing works and

His eyes soon snap open and his mouth follows suit but he can't breathe still and he doesn't think it has anything to do with the guy's crappy quirk. With the room swallowed by the deafening sound of Katsuki's heartbeat, he passes out.

"—nervous."

It's dark again when he awakens, but this time it's a blindfold to blame and not whatever crappy orifice gluing quirk wannabe flowerpot has. He can feel the chafe of a length of rope, tight against his wrists. His first instinct is to panic because how the *hell* did he go from buying letters to tied up and blindfolded and what if it's the goddammed League *again* . His second instinct instructs him not to move a single inch and play dead unless he wants to get cut up or *drowned or burned or*

He breathes in so quietly it doesn't sound like a breath at all.

"You take things too serious."

"T-too serious?! We're breaking the law! Someone *saw* us breaking the law! And who's to say it was only the blond kid that saw? Hokori should've been more careful. Someone could be calling the p-police *right now* ."

"What exactly did you expect?" Katsuki recognizes neither voice. "D'ya think it would be a stress-free job, 'cuz it ain't as much as I wish it was. You gotta be able to handle a little excitement. You're not even the one sticking her neck out to bag the cash coupons— all you have to do is drive— and you're still complaining?"

"B-but—"

"I don't have the energy. Chill out and drive." A pause. "We got an hour till the deadline for the little beast." So Katsuki was right. This is some type of kidnapping scheme. The ground beneath him is unsteady

and the ridges of its texture dig into his ass. He can hear the faint whir of an engine and smell hints of gasoline. Likely they're in some type of van. The voices seem to be coming from behind him but he can also feel a softish, cushion-like thing with an awkward shape (a seat?) against his back, so he'd wager it's a delivery van with the front seats connected to the storage area.

He fiddles with the ropes tying his hands. They're tight but not too much. Not shock-resistant custom-made handcuff level. Could the shimmy technique work again? Though he doesn't feel like breaking his fingers this time and for all he knows someone may be watching him right now…

Fuck it.

He decides getting free is worth the risk even if there might be a kidnapper standing in front of him, and opts to wiggle his wrists to loosen the rope. It feels stupidly easy, how fast it begins rolling down his palms. They must be underestimating him if this is the level of security measures they've set up.

As he gets the last bit of his hand through the rope, the two voices have not stopped talking.

"W-what about the teenager? What are we supposed to do with h-him?" Do they not recognize him? That's probably good.

"Beats me. If he wakes up we'll threaten him with *that* . I dunno if Boss will take him. Push comes to shove we can leave him on the roadside somewhere."

"But he saw H-hokori's face."

"Not ours."

Hands freed, he uses them to get the blindfold and gag off. It takes a little bit to adjust to the evenly lit trunk of the van, but it's nothing a couple of blinks won't fix. He assesses the situation again.

Like he'd thought, the van is the type with no backseat where the front seat is connected to the large trunk area. It's small, devoid of dust, and full of boxes taped shut and papers stacked. He finds the kid three steps away, resting against some boxes tied up like Katsuki was. Katsuki notes his soft snores. The surface of his skin on his face and forearms is stamped with fluorescent pale blue 'suu' hiragana in long strips (a quirk?). The sandy aura is limp around him. The kid is asleep.

Katsuki debates untying him. It would be useful to have him free so he can defend himself, but Katsuki doesn't know what's causing his sleep (and therefore what it would take to wake him up) and he looks so young he may just make for a headache and deadweight. He's placed so he can be seen from the two front-seats as well, so if Katsuki moves him now and the two dumbos upfront turn around at any time they'll be busted.

So Katsuki leaves him, weaving through the boxes for some sort of weapon as he thinks of a plan. A few of the untaped ones look to be full of plastic bottles of nail polish remover and acetone. He ignores them. He comes across something like a toolbox with lines of holes on each side and, without considering things twice, he hooks his fingers on the latch and pulls it free.

The inside seems to be a velvet material, soft to the touch. He's not sure of the color though, because whatever is in this box, it's glowing a pale white. A closer inspection reveals… clouds? It looks like it's full of fluffy, grey-white clouds. What?

Curiosity drives him as he pokes a finger inside the clouds. It goes right through them. They feel like nothing at all. After two seconds of confusion, it dawns on Katsuki that he's looking at an aura, like the quirk shit. It's a realization that poses about as many questions as it answers. What is it in the box that's emitting this cloudy aura? He doesn't think it could be anything but a baby. Anything bigger would not fit. Even the baby would have to be extra extra midget-sized.

He stares at it a bit more. The van hits a speed bump and everything jumps up a little.

Katsuki sticks his hand into the cloudy aura and comes into contact with something soft, warm, and… furry?

He can barely suppress a yelp as the thing bites his finger. It's a tiny fuzzy monster and it decides right then to hop out of the box and use Katsuki's arms as a speedway, crawling all over. The only reason he's not getting set off is because of how goddamn weird being used as a road feels. It takes a shit ton of effort, but Katsuki catches the thing with both palms eventually, leaning back and trying to keep himself from breathing hard.

It's a kitten with bright blue eyes and an uneven coat of smoke and gray. It bares its teeth at Katsuki, hissing and purring lowly as it tries to escape. Fucking hell, he doesn't need a goddamn cat! If he gets

caught because of this drop of shit he will dig a hole and walk into it himself he fucking swears.

But the thing is relentless, Katsuki tries and tries to shove it back in the box and get it to stay, but it doesn't fucking want to, it spreads its legs wide, letting them catch on the ledges of the box and stopping itself from being dropped in. Katsuki lets it go as a last-ditch effort and it runs up his arm again, taking a brief detour inside his hoodie before settling on the hood, using it as a sort of resting pouch.

It's weird, everything about it is weird, from the unfamiliar weight on his back to the cat hair everywhere to the cloudy aura now gathering at his neck (which implies the thing has a fucking quirk and that's a whole separate can of worms Katsuki is not willing to deal with). But he doesn't have time for whining, because this whole scuffle hasn't been a quiet ordeal.

"Awful lot of noise back there," says kidnapper one in a bored tone, some dude with a smokey aura and mop of stringy blue hair.

"Y-you tied them both up well didn't you?" asks kidnapper two, the driver, a woman with long dark hair and a clear aura like the one Memory Machine's senpai has. Katsuki still has no idea what it means. "It could be the boxes? Maybe, I don't know… Oh god, why am I doing this again oh god—"

Katsuki crawls at top speed to the position he woke up in, which doesn't take long, since it's four steps away.

"So much noise."

"Shirushi check." She sounds frantic. "Check right now. I'm driving so I can't but you b-better check. "

When kidnapper one turns around, hooking a lazy arm over the top of the passenger seat, Katsuki holds his breath.

"The kid looks like he's out cold and the blonghng—" Taking advantage of the element of surprise, Katsuki shoots up and tugs kidnapper one's arm down, dragging him backward. It's twisting at an awkward and painful angle, and when the guy tries using his other arm to free himself Katsuki drags that one too, pulling them so they're hooked around his seat. His smokey aura concentrates around his hands and Katsuki sees that embedded in his palms are what seem like rollers of Suu-shaped stamps.

Bingo.

He takes the dude's own hand, gathers one of his sleeves up to expose his forearm, then rolls his palm over it to stamp a line of Suu. Sleepy bastard goes slack then, and after ten seconds of silence, he lets out a big ass snore.

The van erupts into chaos.

" *No no no* what are you doing? You're not supposed to be up. No g-go back to sleep b-ba—" Katsuki ignores her, pulling kidnapper one over his seat until he collapses into a limp heap on Katsuki's side of the van. Using the rope Katsuki took off himself, he binds kidnapper one's hands and, after shoving him in the corner, climbs over the middle area between seats where the gears stick is to take the passenger seat.

Kidnapper two whips her head frantically from Katsuki to the road to her immobilized friend and looks like she's a hair away from crying.

This doesn't make much difference to Katsuki, he still leans over and tries to steal control of the car from her. It's a goddamn mess, she shoves a hand at him while the other scrambles to drive straight and Katsuki tries and fails to pry said hand of the steering wheel.

"Let go you psycho," Katsuki says, squeezing himself into the driver seat alongside kidnapper lady and fighting to get access to the brakes.

"Psycho?! Me?! *Y-you're* the one trying to crash the car! You weren't supposed to wake up—"

"I'm not trying to crash the car. I'm trying to *stop* the car. Now give me the fucking steering wheel."

"No." She slaps him across the face even as her voice wobbles. Fine, if that's how they want to play Katsuki can play. He slaps her back, then elbows her in the gut. She chokes, face red and eyes wet with frustration. Katsuki gives her zero breathing room, grips her shirt, and tugs, pulling her out of the seat. He shoves her into the passenger seat using his feet. Then he kicks her a couple extra times for good measure. She groans, but recovers fast, pulling at his leg.

"I can't— I can't get caught. I *have* to do this—"

"Shut the hell up." He kicks her grip away and sits down properly.

Access to the driver's seat? Acquired.

Katsuki stares at all the controls of the car. He's not doing a thing yet it's moving anyway.

Driving ability? …Pending.

If the car was going in squiggles before it's going in zig zags now. He stops touching the steering wheel entirely

"You move a single inch I'm crashing this thing," Katsuki threatens and the woman freezes mid-lunge. Then, her breath hitches and she starts to tear up.

"Let me back in my seat, *please* . I need to do this!"

"No, ya don't."

"You don't get it. You don't. I don't want to hurt anyone but I—I need the money from this. My dad's gambling debts are going to sink us. There's no way I could pay them without this."

"I didn't ask for your tragic backstory—"

She cries harder. "Don't you get it even a little? It's so much money. I could never pay it off with my delivery job. I'm already working two other jobs and I'm quirkless so I can't even make money off my quirk."

That sucks, but what is Katsuki supposed to do about it. Sit back and let her kidnap a kid?

"No one's gonna get hurt!" she continues, "All they do is put the kids up for ransom, Hokori said. They d-don't get hurt or anything. The parents just pay up and get their kids back safe and sound. They don't need the money anyway. I do."

"Are you fucking *stupid* or what? How do you know they don't need the money? Who's to say you ain't forcing other families to go into debt like you because you're stealing their damn kids?" Katsuki tentatively pushes one of the pedals and the car jerks. He moves his foot away like it's burned. Maybe not then. "And what fuck sorta argument is 'they only get put up for ransom'?! It's still fucking ransom you stickbrain. What do you think kidnappers do to kids whose parents don't show or can't afford to pay? You think they send 'em to the merry-go-round to play horsey and have a fun time? Fuck no. They get sold and trafficked."

“W-what am I supposed to do then?!” she wails.

“I’m not your counselor, lady. I don’t fucking know. But stealing kids ain’t nothing but a one-way ticket to jail. Get a better job or something.”

“Y-you say that like it’s easy. You’ve n-never had a job have you!” she accuses.

Katsuki grits his teeth. “Nope, and I got no idea how to drive either. So you shut your trap unless you want to fly high from your old man’s debts via car accident.”

“You don’t— W-what did you take the car for then?! Oh god— we’re gonna die— oh god.” Katsuki presses the accelerator again by mistake. Another puke-inducing jerk sends the car skidding outside of the main road, through the safety barrier, and into the patches of grass at its side. The path is descending so it keeps the car barreling forward.

“The breaks— hit the breaks kid. S-slowly, it’s the other pedal.”

The van comes to a stop at last and Katsuki exhales, looking at the gearbox at his side and moving the lever to P for parking like he remembers seeing his real hag do a couple of times. They’re a few dozen meters outside the main road technically, but Katsuki would rather stop here than send the van rolling in an attempt to park.

He exhales hard and blinks, turning around to face kidnapper lady.

He comes face to face with the barrel of a gun. Holy shit. Did she pull that out of her ass?

“I’ll shoot!” She’s shaking horribly.

“Go ahead.”

“I’ll d-do it I sw— wait what?”

“I said shoot.”

“ *Nooo* y-you’re insane—”

“You… don’t know me, right?” he asks more for confirmation than anything. It would be a serious pain in the ass for her to spill to the police about him when she’s questioned later if she does.

She shakes her head a tiny amount. “A-am I supposed to?”

“Nah.”

“W-whatever, give me back my seat or— this gun is fully loaded you know!”

Katsuki is surprised if he’s honest, that whoever runs this kidnapping scheme is willing to give guns even to people as inexperienced as her. Guns aren’t exactly sold at your local grocery store. The only reason Katsuki has seen one before is Snipe-sensei back at UA.

She doesn’t make your typical picture of a villain, snot-nosed and tear-drowned and evidently far too nice a person. Not the type of villain Katsuki had been preached about since he was a kid or the type he’s had too close for comfort experiences with. Looks like villains can be put on a shittiness tier list too.

“You a newbie at this?”

“Ne— it’s my first job but I’m— I’m dangerous.”

“Seriously woman, what are you here for? You’re going to ruin your life for some dirty money?”

“My life is already ruined! I’m bone-tired every day, I dropped out of university and I still c-can barely pay daily living expenses for my siblings. They deserve better.”

“So does that kid you’ve tied up back there and his sister probably going crazy looking for him.”

She bites her lip and the hands holding the gun tremor, she seems torn up, and her tears are running like waterfalls. That coupled with her ruined ponytail and crumpled clothes from her catfight with Katsuki earlier does not make for a pretty sight.

“ *Please* — I really don’t want to shoot you— so move!” She doubles down. When Katsuki stares, unimpressed by her obvious bluff, she makes a strangled noise in her throat. Then she sits up, standing on her knees in the seat, and aims the gun into the back of the truck. “I’ll s-shoot him then!”

“ *You’re* going to murder a ten-year-old?” She flinches. “I don’t buy it.”

If he tenses and prepares to knock the gun from her hands anyway that’s none of her business. Time seems to move in slow motion as her

trembling fingers close around the trigger and her eyes blink away tears and stay shut and Katsuki sticks out a hand to knock the gun away, but he's not going to make it and—

The seats fill with the scent of rain and a crack of thunder reverberates around the car. The woman is startled into squeezing the gun but her aim has changed enough that the bullet ends up embedded uselessly into the piles of cargo. It seems to have hit one of the boxes of acetone Katsuki looked through earlier, judging by the sound of liquid gushing and spilling. She drops the gun like a hot potato and sobs as the small cloud that's formed around her showers her with a rapid downpour and soaks everything.

Katsuki jerks when the furry beast he'd forgotten was in his hood curls its tiny tail around his neck and meows loudly. The cloud the woman is fighting sparkles with lightning and strikes her in the face. She jolts and collapses forward, hitting her head on the car's dashboard, knocking herself out.

Did he just get saved by a *cat* with a weather summoning quirk? What even is this day anymore?!

Shaking his head, he goes to start looking through the kidnapper's pockets for some type of phone. The trouble is, the cloud his newly acquired magic cat summoned isn't going away, in fact, it's buzzing around the van and shooting random bolts of lighting everywhere. A particularly loud spark flashes in the back, and he *hears* something ignite.

Fuck. The acetone. His stomach drops. The kid and the sleepy dumbass are going to suffocate or burn alive back there. *Shit* .

He opens the window and dumps kidnapper lady outside as fast as he can. She hits the grass with a thud. Well, she might have some shit broken, but it's better than dying, right?

Then Katsuki hops into the back, coughing hard, eyes watering from the smoke the rapidly growing pyre of acetone fueled flames has formed in the center of the van's trunk. He hates fire so fucking much. Goosebumps bloom on his skin. The small weather cloud is doing double duty, the waning rain tries and fails to put the fire out while the lighting bolts ignite more. It's so fucking hot in here, waves of smoke and heat and dust make Katsuki choke up.

He grabs the kid by the sides and hauls him into the front. Sleepy dumbass proves to be more of a challenge, he's a tall fucker which

means he's not easy to manhandle. *I'm a fucking weakling.*

But the fire quite literally licking his ass is a stellar incentive, so Katsuki does manage to get him into the smoke-filled front somehow, push him out the window alongside the kid, then jump out himself.

He drags the pile of people as far as he can from the burning wreck. Said wreck makes a very loud popping noise, and the shroud of fire balloons, billowing upward into a scene that could almost be considered beautiful.

Katsuki lets himself collapse against the grass and a laugh he can't figure out the source of breaks itself from his throat. That… happened. Okay. This is fine. Okay.

Shit. His letter supplies might've been in there —the ones didn't even pay for— and now they're ashes. Same goes for the tote he'd used to carry around his books. They were public library books. He's going to be in so much trouble.

Though he supposes this very arson-looking situation will be a much bigger problem.

He digs his face into the dirt and wishes it would swallow him up. "Fuuuck."

What's he supposed to do now? The wreck is visible with ease from the main street and it's a matter of time before the police show up. He needs to call the police anyway because he can't leave the kidnapped kid with his (albeit incompetent) kidnappers.

Right, the kid.

Katsuki crawls over and unties him, sitting on the lady kidnapper in case she wakes up and decides to pull some bullshit. He uses the kid's rope and blindfold to bind her arms, then, after checking everyone is still breathing and has a pulse, lays the kid gently to his right and dumps the two dumbasses to his left, far enough away from each other that the woman can't use the rollers on Sleepy's palms to send Katsuki snoozing.

A patdown of Sleepy Fuck reveals two phones, his own phone that's locked with a passcode Katsuki can't be bothered to guess, and a simpler, bright orange phone with a plastic case that looks like it's made for kids.

It doesn't have a lock, so Katsuki swipes it open and looks through the contacts. It uses letters like the English alphabet but the words aren't English, though some appear similar. This has got to be the kid's phone. Did he mention something like a sister?

Katsuki lands on a contact called 'Soeur'. Soeur equals sister? The kid has fifty missed calls from that number. It's gotta be her. He presses it and calls without thinking twice.

"Gabriel je deviens fou! Où es-tu, bon sang — " Not even a moshi moshi. She sounds hysterical.

"Not him," Katsuki says in Japanese, "He almost got kidnapped. The car burned before they could. You might want to come to pick him up."

" *What —*" she's switched to Japanese and her voice sounds lower. She's much better at it than her brother, Katsuki can barely tell she has an accent, *"He got kidnapped?! Is he okay?! Who are you?!"*

"Mhm. Yup and he's fine, sleeping. I saw the guy trying to kidnap him — it was an employee at that store— and followed. He ended up getting me too. Things are fine now, but yeah… I don't wanna leave your brother lying around so you better hurry."

" *Wait, but—* "

"I'll text you the location and call the police too. The two other kidnappers are tied up. Dunno about the one at the store."

" *You—"*

Katsuki hangs up. Texts her the location by GPS then opens the kid's notes app to leave a quick report for the police. The chances of some passer-by not having called the police or the firefighters are subzero, so he doesn't bother notifying them, instead taking off his outer hood and balling it up.

The furry cat that's still in there jumps out and settles itself on his shoulders again, half sitting inside the hem of his long-sleeved undershirt. It's a little cold, but he flings his hoodie into the fire anyway. As cheap a trick as it is, the change of clothes should put people off his trail.

He hears the sirens of a firetruck in the distance. As a final measure, he smothers the phones he touched in dirt, rubs them all over the

fingers of the two kidnappers to mask the DNA trail a little, then puts them in a visible place next to the kid.

The firetruck might as well be blaring in his ears, so he escapes before he can get caught into an underpass on the other side of the road. He waits to see the firefighters land on the scene and once they do he begins walking along a part of the path that hides him from view, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible. The position of the sun tells him it's somewhere around midday, and Tokyo's skyscrapers are a long way away, which means they must've been driving for some time.

He's gonna need to walk all the way to the library now. The lack of mask and hood makes him feel exposed, and he smooths his spiky hair down self-consciously. Will he get recognized? None of the kidnappers did and they saw his face up close. Maybe news about him isn't as big here in Tokyo? Memory Machine did say he looked different and she'd only made the connection because of her quirk. He sure hopes that's the case.

The cat sprawls across his left shoulder. It feels bigger and heavier than it did before.

Katsuki grabs it and it hisses once before melting into his hands. He's never been much of an animal person. When he was younger and couldn't control the output of his sweat well enough he risked leaving bombs on anything he petted, and with some animals, a lick of his sweat could poison or kill them. He doesn't have to worry about that anymore, and it feels sort of nice, petting the cat awkwardly. It seems to like him.

He wonders why he bothered following that guy at the stationary store at all. Wonders what the lady kidnapper is gonna say to the police.

The cat meows.

"I know. I'm fucking tired too."

He makes it to the library three hours later. After walking for the first hour he'd come across a metro station. He used that 1000¥ he didn't get to use at the stationery store to buy a cap, a tote, and a mask from the 100¥ near the station then a 320¥ ticket for the metro itself.

The cat he'd had no idea what to do with, so that's what he'd bought

the tote bag for. It's resting in there right now, fast asleep. Animals aren't allowed inside the library but he's already broken the law much worse today this little bend won't push it.

His face aches and his throat is burning for water as he trudges in silence to the tables of the Q section. Exhausted won't cut it to explain his current bone-deep fatigue.

"Hey there grumpy. You're late today." And *there's* Memory Machine. It's odd how her voice feels familiar and even makes him relax as he falls into a chair. "Woke up on the wrong side of the bed?"

"Shut up." It feels pathetic to admit he's nervous about how he's supposed to explain what happened with the books to her.

"I—" they both say at the same time.

"You go first," she allows.

"Came back to return those books I borrowed since I'm leaving Tokyo soon, and I… fuck… they're kind of ashes now."

She stares at him, pushing up her glasses. "What does that mean?"

"They're burned. Probably." He doesn't know where they went.

"…How did that happen?!"

He swallows. "Long story."

Memory Machine frowns, coming up way too close and sniffing the air. "You do smell like smoke. Did you have a fight with a house fire on your way here? And what's with the colorful hat and mask? "

"Long story."

The cat in his bag chooses right that moment to meow.

"W—"

" *Very* long story. Don't fucking ask. I promise I'll… buy new exact copies of the books I lost to replace them." He hopes she won't get into trouble. He's already been enough of a nuisance.

She nods then picks a book from the shelves so she can pretend to be helping him if anyone walks by and sits down opposite him. She's smiling the "an annoying thing I find amusing because I'm a backward

dumbass happened" smile and Katsuki resists the urge to groan. There's more? "My news trumps yours," she says. "Hmmm, I don't know if it's good or bad though, maybe mid-range? Average news? You a cup half empty or full kind of g—"

"Get to the point."

She fumbles a little with her handphone before turning it around to show him.

"It's been so hard to hold off on reading but I wanted to see your reaction in real-time. I finished the Spider Silk Chronicles while I waited, you know. Turned out Kinu could come back to l—oof spoilers. And off topic too. Sorry" She clears her throat. "I meant to say congrats, on your death day."

Bakugou Katsuki announced dead by authorities, backed by parents and the HPSC.

That's what the headline says.

Feeling a little numb, Katsuki takes the phone from her and starts reading through.

They know more than he assumed they did, he notes. Looks like they'd found the basement and with how sloppy his escape had been it's no surprise that he'd ended up leaving DNA everywhere.

The press release explains that the likelihood of the Bakugou who robbed the bank being the real one is very low, as he'd been missing for over two months after being kidnapped, there was strong evidence of torture, the League had people with quirks that allowed copying of appearance, and their boss had confessed to killing the real Bakugou (This gets an eyebrow raise because do they mean All For One? If he thinks that way why the hell is the League still looking for Katsuki?). A swift court decision had ruled the real Bakugou dead and the bank incident a case of framing and defamation.

It's not all that wrong, he's just kinda still up and kicking.

There's also a request to refrain from further media articles surrounding him and, upon scrolling more, an official statement from UA claiming responsibility and apologizing for "Not taking the necessary measures to protect an ex-student despite being the reason for constant exposure to both media and villain attacks."

Fat load of good that's gonna do now. It's weird if he's honest. They hadn't done anything after the Sports Festival and they'd booted him out so they had no weight to throw around him and no reason to pretend they were invested. Why the sudden change in demeanor after months of silence?

Whatever.

The article closes with a short statement from his parent's PR office, calling the whole clusterfuck a "family tragedy" and requesting no more media discussion so they could "mourn properly".

Katsuki gets it. They must be having a pretty rough time with work, anyone would if some fuckstick who looked like their son decided to be a criminal in broad daylight. The real Katsuki wasn't much better in the PR department either.

In fact, this whole announcement is probably PR damage control. Get people to quit talking about the situation before it snowballs. It's a bit early to get a regular presumed dead declaration (he knows they don't have the evidence for anything else because they'd need a corpse and he's still breathing fine, unfortunately) for someone they know wasn't in a natural disaster so UA had likely pulled some strings with the HPSC to get the situation closed as soon as possible.

Katsuki's not sure how he feels about that. He gives her phone back to Noriko.

On one hand, he's at least not a wanted criminal anymore, on the other hand, the pathetic needy voice inside him whispers that they gave up on him and now everyone knows how weak he was with conclusive evidence. It's a literal death sentence.

He rubs at the chain of scars around his wrist and zones out until Memory Machine makes a noise not unlike a lurch. When Katsuki looks up at her she seems breathless in a bad way.

"Kid… is this stuff they're saying about the villains true?"

"Yeah," he says, absent-minded. She flinches.

"Shit. I thought… You did say they wanted to recruit you… I knew you had problems but—shit."

Katsuki frowns at her. It looks like she's processing what exactly she'd walked herself into by interacting with him for the first time. "Why

are looking at me like that?"

Her chin wobbles. "I didn't—There are *pictures* ." Katsuki is happy he didn't see them. "There's blood *everywhere* . I'm so s—"

"Finish that sentence and I'll kill you." He doesn't need people's pity. "You didn't do anything."

She drags herself out of her chair and drags him out of his. "What the —" Katsuki starts.

"I know you're not gonna let me hug you—" Damn straight. "—but you *will* let me treat you to some food. Your favorite food. Any food. You deserve it."

For what, being weak? He doesn't say anything though because he really is hungry.

"Aren't you at work?"

"Fuck my work." And if that isn't a sentence twelve-year-old Katsuki would have died to hear from his old hag . Sixteen-year-old Katsuki knows better.

"Yeah nope. I can wait a few more hours for closing time. Go do your damn job."

"But—"

"Go. You look like you're about to kneel over."

She *is* looking pale. Civilians and their distaste for blood.

"Fine… But you better sit your ass down and wait *right* there. I'm not letting your ghost behind out of my *sight*. You might have combat training but I have twenty-two years of big sister experience and one more strike and I *will* adopt you this is a threat—"

ONE AND A HALF WEEKS PRIOR.

Masaru has a headache.

He's prone to migraines, an unfortunate side effect of both stress and anxiety, but this one, this one is the killer migraine of migraines. Pain pulsates in his ears, more pain pulsates in the back of his temple. He'd never liked the police station anyway, but the over-lit hallway that's

not mixing well with his head troubles makes it unbearable.

Mitsuki stomps in front of him, trying to appear composed and put together. She looks fine to the average passer-by, but the slight hesitance of her steps gives everything away to someone like Masaru who's well-versed in her language. She's as shaken as him, perhaps even more.

Not easy having the first trace of your missing son in months be a news broadcast of him proudly committing a bank robbery and arson.

Except it's not him, is it? Katsuki would never do that. He'd always insisted on being a hero, he'd wanted it from the moment he'd learned what they were. In fact, Masaru is ashamed to admit that his heroism aspirations are about the only thing concerning Katsuki he's a hundred percent certain of. Any other information on him as a person and his interests and likes and hobbies is outdated at best and non-existent at worst.

Masaru had been the type who ran away completely. Katsuki could be *too much*. They got compared to each other a lot but Katsuki was twice, even thrice as emotional as Mitsuki. Masaru would get overwhelmed and clock out every time they had an argument, and his poor efforts at diffusion reaped very little success. He'd try to play the mediator, the Mitsuki translator so to speak, telling Katsuki to tone it down and explaining that Mitsuki was harsh because she loved him (and *that* he was sure of, he knew his wife far better than he did their son). He'd beg for him to meet her halfway and compromise.

Katsuki had always looked at him like he didn't understand at all, and he was right. Masaru didn't. He hadn't known what to do. His son may as well have been a stranger.

They find Detective Tsukauchi's office drowning in discussion.

"—not him. I know it. I'm sure of it." It's Izuku. It's been a long time since Masaru last saw him. He's grown up a lot yet he's stayed familiar, the same sea of green-black curls and freckled baby face. Inko must be proud of him. Masaru is hit by a wave of melancholy. His head hurts.

Detective Tsukauchi greets them and Izuku follows suit.

"You've gotten taller Izuku," Masaru says as they sit on the couch, "I hope you've been okay.

“It’s been a long time, and I’ve… I’ve been fine” the boy replies, though nothing about him looks fine to Masaru. He sits right back down after greeting them and continues to insist on whatever they were discussing earlier.

“You have to trust me.”

“I know Midoriya, I believe you. But it’s not that simple when it comes to this type of issue. ”

The door soon opens again and in walks Eraserhead, Katsuki’s old teacher, holding three cups of coffee. He places one at Tsukauchi’s desk and keeps the other two for himself. His appearance is more haggard than usual. His eyes seem so dry they’re making Masaru’s own scream for hydration. He nods at them simply. They all know what they’re here for, anyway.

“Should he be here,” Mitsuki says, referring to Izuku, “he’s a kid.”

“He insisted so we drove over together,” Eraserhead explains and Mitsuki frowns.

“I’m the one who knows Kacchan best.” The accusation hangs heavy in the air. Masaru swallows. He hates this atmosphere.

“Uh, since you’re all here.” Tsukauchi leads the conversation from there and begins explaining what new evidence they have, that is almost nothing, then levels them with a serious stare and asks, “What do you want us to do in this situation?”

“Odds are that it’s not Katsuki who robbed the bank.”

“It wasn’t him.”

“The DNA matched up Midoriya, that’s not guaranteed.”

“No. It isn’t him. It makes no sense. You told me All For One admitted to killing Kacchan, whoever it was from the League who attacked me at the License Exam — they looked like Kacchan but weren’t him so we know they can do that— said the same thing, and now suddenly the League has had Kacchan on their side the whole time? And you found evidence, didn’t you, that he was— was tortured. You’re saying his appearance didn’t change at all after that? The person at the bank didn’t use his quirk once either. Kacchan loves his quirk. You know he’d use it. Never mind that he’d never be so stupid as to commit a bank robbery in broad daylight.” Izuku is breathless by the end of it

and Masaru is kind of impressed. He's clearly thought about this a lot.

"Kacchan isn't a villain and he would never be. If you think that you haven't known him at all." It's ironic a little, that this is coming from the person Katsuki had been at his most villainous with. Or maybe that's what makes Izuku qualified to play the judge.

Tsukauchi sighs. "To be honest, I agree with him. It's all a little too convenient and backward. The problem is that the lack of a corpse won't let us be conclusive."

They're talking about his son in the terms of corpses and crime scenes, that's the way they've been talking about him for months, and it makes an uncomfortable feeling churn in Masaru's gut.

"What if he's not dead?" he asks.

"I have a lot of… experience with All For One. If he says he killed him, it's near-guaranteed he did."

What had Katsuki been up against?

"But you said there was a trail leading upstairs…" says Mitsuki. She's being so quiet it's scaring Masaru.

"That's the difficult part…But I didn't call you here to discuss that. I called you to ask what you wanted to do— what you wanted to tell the press. You should contact your PR agent too, but in my opinion, you've got two options. Either say nothing and have Katsuki announced a villain despite evidence against the bank robber being the real deal, or admit to everything that's happened and have Katsuki presumed dead by court order."

Masaru likes neither but he's got no choice but to pick. If they do nothing their business will collapse, already they are having sponsors withdraw and customers cancel orders and appointments. The job relies on good press and the recent articles have been anything but. They'd never know peace. And if they announce their son dead without being sure of it? That's as good as giving up on him.

Son or work balanced on a scale, putting weight on one means losing touch with the other. It's always been about that in the end, hasn't it?

"Can't we say it wasn't him but not announce him dead? What if he shows up again?"

“Presumed death is more trustworthy.” *He won’t* is what Masaru hears.

“You can’t do that! You can’t give up on him!”

“Midoriya—”

“The whole reason we’re here is that you gave up on him!” He’s not pulling the punches, Masaru thinks he saw Eraserhead flinch. “How will he feel when he sees that we stopped looking after less than three months? He’d never want to come back again.” He talks like Katsuki being alive is a truth of the universe and Masaru isn’t sure if he should envy that trust or pity that naivete.

“I understand your sentiment but it doesn’t have to be so black and white. Declaring him dead doesn’t mean a close on the investigation or search,” Tsukauchi says, “In fact, it’s very convenient. We can stop the media from sticking their noses in and handle the investigation itself in private.” He lowers his voice. “To tell you the truth the higher-ups of the force haven’t been the most enthusiastic about relegating funds to this issue and that’s been holding us back. This option is a win-win. I’ll promise you that I’ll keep working on the case myself.”

It makes sense, what he’s saying. At this point being stubborn will only lead to them losing more. They already lost their son because they were too focused on their business, what’s the point of losing their business too over a case made of a web of suppositions and half-baked evidence? Masaru looks at Mitsuki and her gaze tells him she agrees. He nods at her and holds out a comforting hand.

“Tell us what we have to do.”

Though it might just sever their connection to Katsuki forever.

Chapter End Notes

1) i had five separate drafts of the whole kidnapping scene and spent way too much time on the characters lmfaooo.

Flower Head is Hokori Hanahito and his quirk is these flowers that bloom in his hair and that release pollen that glues shut the different orifices of anyone inhaling it. There's a flower on his head for each orifice and everytime it's used up it wilts, falls off, and a new one needs to grow in its place, which takes about fifteen minutes. Meanwhile the effects of the pollen itself last 3-5 minutes depending on the person. The pollen is small enough that

a regular mask won't filter it.

Kidnapper Lady - Kanashi Sadako quirkless. She's a little over the top but I had a lot of fun with her. Wanted to use her as a sort of window to show that some of these villains are actually just desperate people instead of super smart mega manipulators.

Sleepy - Shirushi Neru, has rollers on his palms that stamp the hiragana SUU. Suu is like the Japanese onomatopoeia for sleep (or one of them at least) think the equivalent of ZZZZZ. Anyone who gets stamped by him will fall asleep. The sleep lasts until either the stamp is washed off or it goes away on its own (which takes 6-7 hours). It won't work on people who are already unconscious, he has to drink ink to keep the stamps fueled, and unlike Flower Head he's not immune to his own quirk.

The whole sequence might've been a bit over the top or unrealistic but I had fun with it, and Katsuki doing so well against them is more meant to be a testament to the kidnappers' weaknesses than a celebration of his strength.

2) Also intro to quirked cat. We've got the weather cat. Katsuki needs a cat friend to cuddle with lmfaoo.

3) The final scene was also so so hard. the first draft had Deku calling them out a lot, but it started feeling needlessly service and a bit out of character, so I toned it down some.

Just gahhh I hope it was okay. I'm not 100% satisfied with it but...

Chapter 12: Walking home to you (then walking right back)

Chapter Summary

Loose ends to tie.

Chapter Notes

evil cackles

you know when you think up an idea for a story, and you have these scenes you're desperate to get to, these scenes you plan the whole thing around? at least that's the way I tend to write, and this is one such moment. part of this chapter here has been written for months, I've been itching to get to it. it's 10k words long lmaooo

I've tried my best to tease it subtly but I am very nervous :D. i hope everyone likes it :n

the long italicized parts are supposed to be flashbacks btw.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Katsuki nails the scalloped yellow awning to the wooden frame of the window. This abandoned building a few streets west of central Musutafu is the one Koharu always uses when she stops by here if the perfect area at its front to fit the midget-sized door is anything to go by. They're adding a few bits of décor to the front to make the place recognizable even if the building itself will stay empty.

He tugs on his scarf, digging his face into it and breathing in. He'd always ran hot, so the winter was harder for him. It's not yet winter, but they're officially in November, which counts as winter as far as Katsuki is concerned. It's been two weeks since healer hag proposed an apprenticeship and twelve days since Katsuki accepted.

She'd agreed to give him an initial testing period of six months to a year then they could both decide if they wanted Katsuki to keep working further. He'd try his best because he always did, but the possibility of him not clicking with the job was still a big one and there was no use in signing some sort of long-term contract. Not that there's much in the field of contracts happening right now, because

Katsuki is kind of legally dead and has no ID or bank account. But whatever, they're making it work. He knows enough about personal finance not to get scammed and healer hag wouldn't do that anyway.

She is a brutal teacher as it turns out. She'd warned Katsuki that she took her work very seriously, and this was especially important for someone who worked as a doctor and had people come to her for health issues ranging from a stubbed toe to supervillain-inflicted stab wounds (guilty as charged). She'd started drilling him on basic first aid, gave him a fat-ass handwritten journal of medicines and medicine effects and dosages to memorize, and she'd requested he find some way to go about developing his aura seer situation (Katsuki started a journal for his observations).

So far he's been mostly doing grunt work, things like cleaning machinery that's not biohazardous or organizing shelves or acting as what's in essence a clerk. It's not the work itself that's tiring as much as it's the incessant studying he does on top of it and on top of his own increased training regiment. He doesn't mind though. He lives off having something to do. He may be a shit human but he's not gonna stay useless if it kills him.

"I need help with the new shipment of Gotu Kola," Koharu says once he's back inside. The drawer for that particular herb is so high it near reaches the ceiling, and Koharu may be mobile for her age but by height, she's tiny.

"Why haven't you moved it to a lower drawer already?" he asks once he's finished stuffing the herb where it needs to be. Even Katsuki needs to use the shelves by the storage wall as a makeshift ladder to reach that far.

"No," she says and doesn't elaborate. She does that a lot. On his second day, Katsuki tried rearranging the herbs in the drawers by alphabetical order only to get a big ass scolding for "ruining their careful (hah, more like nonexistent) setup". Katsuki is a quick learner, so he knows now not to bother pressing for answers when she gets like that.

"So much dust in this city," she complains, squinting at the puffs of particles glowing in the sunlight slipping through the open door. Compared to the island in the middle of nowhere that houses the main body of the shop, Musutafu has the air quality of a trash dump. "I don't get why you wanted to stop by."

Katsuki's eye twitches. "Didn't you say you had business to attend to over here too?"

"I could've had the new glassware shipped to me anywhere. The seller happens to live in Musutafu so, since you wanted to go, I thought I could save the travel fees."

"Whatever." He tries not to feel bad about causing an unplanned stop in their tour. "I got some loose ends to tie."

They won't be staying for long anyway. It's four days then they're off to Nara so Koharu can attend some quirk doctor conference.

When Katsuki had agreed to live here semi-permanently, it had been a bit pathetic to acknowledge that he had few qualms with cutting ties with the heroes. He'd neither wronged them nor did they give any shits about him, so it makes for a two-way street of desertion. He doesn't owe them anything. He owes the villains even less. His parents said they were mourning him. More people crossed off the list.

But there is someone out there who Katsuki owes a whole lot to. An entire childhood in fact. And he'd thought about it hard, about how he should approach the clusterfuck that is Deku. He'd contemplated what he was doing this apology for when he didn't want forgiveness he didn't deserve it but that's beside the point nor would Deku saying "I forgive you." make him feel particularly better.

He'd wondered if it would be self-serving to ask for an apology now and if he was only doing it to relieve a guilty conscience. If it counted at all when what had brought it about was a month of torture. But he'd thrown all that messy shit out the window in the end, because it wasn't about him as much as it was about Deku, and Deku deserved some type of closure. It was the right thing to do. At least Katsuki could try to do that for once.

Which is why he's here, thick ass letter of too many words and everything helpful the League had spilled during his captivity hidden in the futon of the guest bedroom he moved into.

He'd figured he should at bare minimum try to make it up to Deku with something other than words, case in point information, and the fact that he's been sitting on these stupid valuable secrets for months now didn't make him feel good. The doctor could've been stealing who knows how many more kids and he'd been laying around letting him do it. Katsuki had asked Koharu if she was familiar with a quirk doctor by the name Tsubasa or Daruma or Ujiko, but neither she nor

the internet had anything to offer up. The asshole must've given him an alias. Of all things to be vigilant about.) The letters were very awkward to write, three times as awkward since he'd made ones for Icy Hot and Kirishima too.

Kirishima because that stupid nice bastard had called Katsuki like a million times after he'd gotten expelled, Katsuki had ignored all of them, and now he's probably feeling guilty like the too kind stain of shit that he is, and IcyHot because he's kind of privy to some major spoilers for the guy's soap opera of a family drama that was a pain in the ass to write about. ("Dear Icy Hot… Your long-lost brother Crusty is alive, emo, and out for your blood. He hates your trash dad a lot and he fried my arms, kicked me in the gut, then made me look evil and stupid by pretending we were besties robbing a bank together… He's a mass murderer, arsonist, and complicit in torture… Have fun with that…" does not make for the best delivery.)

It goes without saying that the content of these letters is sensitive as hell, which is why he'd decided to hand-deliver them. He can't risk them getting lost in the mail or getting opened by other people or who the fuck knows what.

And maybe it's a coward's move to apologize for being an utter dick by letter, but Katsuki knows that if he tries to arrange some sort of meeting with Deku, the nerd is bound to try and 'help' in some way, either by crying to get him to cave or nicely beating his ass and restraining him into submission because make no mistake, doe-eyed or not, powerless or not, Deku had never taken shit from Katsuki laying down. Plus the whole, "people running around who look like Katsuki but aren't him" situation means anyone who claims to be Katsuki is by default suspicious, so even if Deku is not the type to snitch unless you push it very far, he'd definitely take safety measures and any meeting could transform with ease into a trap.

Katsuki should go back, he knows. He should go back and make it up to Deku for real. But he's a selfish little bitch and he doesn't want to. He doesn't even want to see UA ever again. Because some part of him would be jealous that Deku has everything Katsuki doesn't on top of the heroic spirit he already had, even though he knows Deku deserves it and Katsuki doesn't. It's some sort of karma, isn't it? Doesn't think he could handle it. What he's doing tonight is by itself playing with fire.

And if he thinks about it, when Deku stuck to him like glue while all Katsuki did was put him down, disappearing for good would be nice for Deku, right? And he might have admitted that he'd wronged Deku,

but the mere thought of the stupid nerd still makes Katsuki squirm in discomfort alongside the guilt. This shift in mentality doesn't mean he thinks Deku is the best thing since sliced bread all of a sudden or that Katsuki will worship him.

So the letter it is. Fuck it.

"Oof." He falls on his ass with a thud as a ball of fluff and clouds rams into him. "Dumb shit."

Weather cat got bigger fast. Overnight he'd doubled in size, and now he's as big as a fluffy dog and sure seems to like playing with Katsuki like one.

"I'm back," he says to the shop's unlit front room. Memory machine bought him some nice food, and Katsuki had said goodbye. She's a sappy weirdo. He leaves his shoes by the genkan before stepping inside and makes for the bathroom.

"Welcome ba—" She takes one look at him. "—You got into trouble didn't you?"

He freezes in place and takes his cat out of the bag. "I got a cat." No use in beating around the bush.

"Something tells me a lot more than that happened… is this smoke I smell?"

"There was a burning van involved."

"Right… And you're okay?"

"Uh-huh."

She blinks once, twice, three times. "Alright. You don't need to cook tonight. I already ate." She makes to go back to her study.

"Oi, what about the cat?"

"What about it? It's your cat, isn't it? What do you want me to do about it?"

Katsuki gapes. "You're not gonna ask any other questions? Just gonna let me keep it?"

"Well I'm not allergic so I don't see why not. As long as it stays your responsibility. There's plenty of room here."

“Nah, you’re way too calm.”

“I don’t see a reason to get mad about something inconsequential. I trust you.”

Katsuki flushes. Dumb old lady.

“It has a quirk, you know. The cat.” Katsuki holds it out like the lion in that one old Disney movie. It meows.

Koharu raises her brows, interest piqued. “Where do you find these things, boy.”

“I’m serious.” Katsuki takes a second look at it. It’s a him. “I’m naming him Satsu.”

“You’re naming him ‘murder’?” Koharu says. “That’s horrible.”

It goes in one ear and out the other as Katsuki looks at Satsu again. Definitely Satsu. “Satsu.” Satsu is badass. That is until he wags his tail and a tiny raincloud materializes on top of Katsuki and gives him an unsolicited shower. He tries to swat it away but it only drops more rain. “Fuck you, Satsu, turn it the hell off!”

Koharu laughs. “Does he have a weather quirk?”

Katsuki tries to outrun the cloud but it follows as Satsu hisses. He makes it into the bathroom so at the very least the rain won’t ruin the wooden floors of the hallway.

“Looks like it,” Katsuki yells back in belated response and shoves Satsu in the bathtub. The cloud stays by him and starts wetting him too, which makes him growl and wag his tail again to disperse it. They’re both dripping as they stare at each other. Satsu cocks his head innocently. Dumb cat.

Katsuki feels the corners of his mouth quirk up. He’s got no idea how to take care of this shit.

And that’s how he’d started researching cats and animals with quirks. Apparently, it was uncommon but not unheard of, and the fact that Satsu got big so fast was a trait likely connected to his quirk factor.

Katsuki runs his fingers through Satsu’s smokey coat and he purrs, melting into the touch. He really is a dumb cat. Katsuki used some boxes to set up a bed for him in the same room he’s now using, and

sometimes when Katsuki is doing chores he'll come over and rub himself on Katsuki's feet, or even try to hang himself on his shoulders when he's nowhere near small enough anymore. Sometimes he'll collapse into a puddle and won't move no matter how much Katsuki pokes him. Other times he'll use Katsuki as a scratching post. (Not fun. He only has like three pairs of pants and all of them are now close to being shredded.)

With the cut Koharu gave him for healing Gumball, he'd went out and bought a bunch of cat food and a litter box. He'd thought it would be a pain in the ass but for some reason, Satsu seems to flip flop between being as annoying as possible and liking him a lot, and twice now he's come up to Katsuki at ass o clock in the morning to lick his face and wake him up from nightmares. Then he'll take over Katsuki's futon and sleep next to him. The fact that it's a cat seeing him be weak hits him much lighter, and maybe… Satsu makes for a grounding presence.

Having to be gentle is something Katsuki still struggles with though. Satsu claws up his hoodie and onto his shoulders, making a content noise.

"You're gonna be a little shit today, huh?" he asks but makes no move to get the cat to go away.

Midnight has passed when Katsuki closes the door to the shop. It's one or so AM. The night's air is chilly and this area of the city is pitch black. Secure behind his scarf and hat, Katsuki walks the familiar streets. This isn't a part of Musutafu he hung out a lot in, but it has the unique feel of a hometown, the well-worn lines, and octagon brick-paved sidewalks, the distant scent of the sea.

Without the need for a guide, his feet walk him to his old neighborhood. It takes half an hour, though this with big, rushed steps. The first glimpse of that line of houses makes his heart feel loopy. His own house's sloped roof is visible from the entrance of the street. For some reason, he breaks out into a run. Air whooshes in his ears at the lack of any other sound, every leap makes the bag of envelopes in his coat crinkle.

Katsuki stops at the front of his house and his stomach flips.

This isn't his house anymore.

The left side of the front has been demolished, and there are new

wooden support beams sticking out of the second floor, right where his room used to be. A new construction. The car upfront isn't the old hag's either, and it's not a model she'd touch with a ten-foot pole.

They must've moved out and sold it, Katsuki realizes. *They're gone.*

It makes sense. Only a dumbass would live in a compromised house. It makes perfect sense.

He exhales and it makes him notice how hard his heart is hammering.

Why did he even come here?

As he walks his old route to the train stop that will take him to UA he is careful to avoid a certain park and a certain apartment block facing it.

He's going to hand-deliver the letter to Deku, and the only way to do that is to break into UA.

Extreme? Maybe.

He sits by the window of the almost empty (there are two tired stragglers in his cart, both salarymen, one dead on his feet the other listing to something with headphones plugged in and eyes closed) train and checks again that he's got all his supplies with him.

The school itself announced that everyone would move into dorms after their ability to keep students safe was questioned following the Icy Hot kidnapping fiasco. This is a major pain in the ass for Katsuki because it means he'll have to sneak into a super-secure campus swarming with heroes instead of Deku's regular, unguarded apartment building. But fuck it all, he's going to do it.

The plan itself is simple. All he needs to do to pass the fortified gates is drop one of the reserve passages to the Sun Shop inside the grounds, then waltz in from the shop. The passages are large pockets of fabric that zip up in the front, so they're light and won't make noise when being dropped in. Koharu gave three of them to Katsuki after announcing she'd take him as an apprentice. They were a sort of initiation gift.

She doesn't need to know what he's using them for.

As stalkerish as it feels, he's been lurking on UA-watch subs like a

hawk. Once he'd dug hard enough, he'd managed to find estimated schedules of UA classes fashioned together based on years of anecdotal information from alumni, UA curriculum, zoomed drone footage, and slip-ups from current students. He'd underestimated the level of obsession hero fans could often fall into, and 1-A is particularly popular on the UA-watch sub because they keep getting into trouble. According to them, it's common for first-years to do overnight exercises in Gym Beta following the Culture Festival, to study long-term survival in a shelter situation. That means the dorms should be empty.

Katsuki made sure to report the schedule post as a breach of privacy after he'd saved a copy for himself. The same group of users had made a similar schedule for their first term, and Katsuki was struck by how accurate it was. That could prove dangerous if it was noticed by the right people.

The announcer pipes up, speaking softly, and he gets off the train.

From the station, it's a mere ten-minute walk to reach the campus, and he convinces himself the shake of his fingers is nerves and nothing else.

The U.A. Barrier looks menacing from the perspective of an outsider, and Katsuki understands now why, before Shigaraki came along, this place hadn't been broken into in decades. The wall is automatically raised whenever someone with no verified ID tries to enter, but he knows that's not the only precaution, and that there are sensors over the top of it meant to go off when faced with intruders.

However, Katsuki guesses the sensors must have some sort of criteria for concluding what's considered an intruder. A good quarter of the grounds is covered by the forested Ground Omega, which must have small animals inside, and bar the cityscape training areas like Ground Beta, the majority of the campus is green. There's no way to avoid wildlife in a place like this. That means that the sensors need to be made so they're not getting triggered by harmless furry shits.

In a quirkless world that would mean simple infra-red heat sensors set up to ignore disturbers of a certain weight and size, but people can make themselves tiny and fold themselves into paper and break themselves into pieces, and even lower their body temperatures in this day and age, so a simple heat sensor wouldn't be effective.

That's why the most common security sensors today are ones that

measure quirk levels. While researchers have yet to discover a way to see and interact with quirk energy that doesn't involve almost getting your soul ripped out by a supervillain, they do understand that quirk energy is there and can therefore be measured.

Plus, it's super rare for animals to have quirks (Satsu is like an extra-shiny rare Ei Yuu Oh card), and when they do they're often intelligent or strong enough to be considered threats regardless, so quirk sensors are a perfect solution. After a bit of research, Katsuki discovered that most pet-safe quirk sensors are graded not to sound because of intruders with quirk levels of less than 2000AP, which is the upper cut-off point for quirkless people. It was a surprise to find that quirkless people can still have some quirk energy, though it does explain why Memory Machine's senpai and kidnapper lady had those thin blank energy fields surrounding them.

He takes a long way around to approach the cross-section of the outside barrier and the inside wall of Ground Omega, hiding between bushes and trees. The barrier looks high from where he's crouching in a shrub. It's now or never. He grabs a stone from the path and throws it over the wall. It lands on the other side, crunching leaves in its path. He waits for any sign of alarm, any indication the sensors might in fact be the type that detects any motion because it's UA and they'd be extra like that.

Nothing comes. A squirrel appears from the back of the wall and leaps down, disappearing into the foliage. Katsuki exhales.

It can't be this easy.

He fishes the fabric passage from its front pocket and frowns at the neon glow of its aura. It's technically a quirk-produced item —Katsuki checked that its quirk level is lower than the threshold but what if UA's sensors are pitched lower than the normal ones to make sure nothing gets past? He needs something with a level as close to zero as possible—

His eyes catch on his own skin. Not even the smallest bit of an aura.

Oh.

It might just be even easier.

He lays the passage onto the grass and zips it open, slipping inside into the cool air of his room in the shop. He tiptoes into the hall, avoiding the squeaky spots in the hardwood, and slides open the

supply closet. The handheld quirk level sensor, shaped not unlike the barcode scanners of supermarkets, sits on the top shelf right where he left it.

“Piece of crap,” he mutters at the loud beep that follows the screen lighting up electric blue. A scroll through the settings and he’s got the quirk level scan selected. He turns the sensor to face himself and presses the start button.

Bleep.

Bleep.

Bleep.

Zero.

Katsuki wheezes to hold back a proper laugh. He can’t help it.

He’s more quirkless than a quirkless person.

Placing the scanner back into its spot, he slides the closet closed and stumbles back into his room, climbing through the portal in the wall to find himself once again in the shrubs outside UA. He rolls up the passage and disguises it between some rocks.

The wall is a whole lot less intimidating now, and he slides on his gloves and face mask. Climbing up the wall is harder than he’d like the admit, it’s made of a stupid smooth material and he’s so used to propelling himself with Explosion it’s hard to remember he can’t rely on it to break his fall.

But Katsuki’s not a mountain climber for nothing, so he uses the shrubs as platforms and grips the wall with rough hands, hoisting his body up and up and up until he can see past the boundary into the empty space bordering Ground Omega. The top of the wall is, as expected, inlaid with a strip of sensors.

Moment of truth.

He sticks a finger across the divot of the sensor and squints, preparing himself for the security system to kick in. It doesn’t. He lays an entire hand across. Crickets chirp. He jumps over the wall and shriveled autumn leaves break his fall.

Katsuki waltzed into UA, just like that.

Little Katsuki would've lost his mind at the unexpected perks of being in the forgotten twenty percent. He laughs in his mind to avoid laughing out loud. What was that thing blond phone charger used to say? How the turns have tabled.

But he's not out of the woods yet, he still has to deliver the letter. Charged with renewed adrenaline, he keeps close to the boundary wall of the training ground to stay in the blind spot of any cameras, and in ten minutes or so the horizon opens up to reveal glittering structures. The sight of the main building and its iconic four-sided H shape sends a pang to his chest. He ignores it. That's not what he's here for.

He's here for the rows of buildings that were definitely not there when he left, their architecture this gaudy mix of modern and western antique styles that comes off as cartoonish. They buzz a faint grey. Quirk made. There's no way those were built in a couple of weeks with normal methods.

It's simple enough to find the 1-A dorm, not only does he remember the general layout of the campus from the aerial pictures he scoured the forums for, the building itself is labeled with a fat '1-A' on the front, because what is UA if not lacking in subtlety. There are four balconies on every side of each floor, five floors in total, which, assuming the first floor is common areas, makes that thirty-two possible rooms. The grooves of the brick decorating the exterior make for an easy climb.

Katsuki rules out the left side right away after peeking into two of the rooms on the second floor and finding them unfurnished and unused. He switches to the right side of the same floor, smooshing his face against the glass of the verandas to get a peek inside.

He looks away like he's burned because it must be that diaper grape fucker's room, and he thinks he's going to need at least three liters of bleach to the eyes to forget it. Motherfuck. The petty part of him wonders how this pathetic excuse for a human is deemed hero-worthy and he isn't.

There are little blocks of cheese laid out on the next balcony. Katsuki realizes this when feels the sole of his shoe squish something. He looks down, incredulous. The blocks might spell a word, but he can't be bothered to check what. Instead, he again squints against the glass and almost starts laughing (He is laughing way too much and it's paired with this feeling of vertigo. Nothing about this is hilarious and

yet...) because he knows, the moment he sees the faint outline of the All Might-themed curtain, that he's hit the jackpot. The fourth room he searches out of thirty available and it's the nerd's. Maybe his luck is looking up.

To seal the deal, the glass pane of the veranda door sits a few centimeters open, he's not even going to have to use his beginner superior lock picking skills to get in. He slides the door bit by bit, just enough to fit through. Behind the All Might curtain, lit by the moonlight, are walls so covered in All Might posters there's no wall left to show, there's even the limited edition glow in the dark Silver Era flag Katsuki remembers dying to have as a child pinned above the desk. If this room belongs to anyone but Deku Katsuki will chop his own head off.

Reddish shoes sitting by the doorway are instantly recognizable. The bed is unmade. A stack of print-out papers is scattered by the legs of the chair. No one's inside, as expected. Katsuki steps in with light feet, envelope ready in his pocket.

Much contemplation concludes leaving it on the bed is the best idea. It's somewhere visible the nerd will have to look at if he wants to sleep. The mess of a duvet is giving him a headache though, so he grabs the corners and waves it up and down a few times until it settles in a nicer position. He flattens the front and places the letter on top. There. His work here is done. Now he can—

It takes less than two seconds from the moment the front door to the room clicks open for him to be pinned to the floor, green lightning sparking and the mint glow of a blobby aura washing the room in a pale light.

He gets dark-spotted tunnel vision. His breathing stutters. The voice of whoever is holding him down makes it warbled into his ears, but all he can focus on is the aura. It looks so much like the baby version of All For One's sewer-colored monstrosity. Colors eat up the air around him, the scarred over injury above his stomach stings, strong palms lock him to the floor, the aura closes in and it *burns*.

"N-no— s—stop" He doesn't recognize his own voice, eyes glazed over, seeing polished walls of an unchanging cell, finely pressed, dark suit smelling of decay. The scarf around his neck is suffocating and he wants to get *away*—

"—cchan?"

He blacks out.

The moment Katsuki comes to his chest floods with shame. Shit, what was that?

He rubs at his heavy eyelids and when he takes a look at his surroundings the figure glaring holes into him makes him full-body flinch. The door is closed, while the work lamp on the desk has been turned on, tinting the room a bright sepia. It clashes with the green of Deku's everything. Katsuki feels a little sick.

Damn it. Wasn't he supposed to be at the overnight training exercise?

"Who are you?" Deku says, or rather, demands. His eyes have that fervescent quality Katsuki has always been shit scared of. They make familiar, well-worn strokes of anger spike. *Shit. Don't lose it. Don't lose it.*

Despite everything, he's familiar. This is the longest they've ever been apart, he realizes. Until four months ago, Katsuki couldn't remember a world without Deku. This green dumbass is his constant.

"Who. Are. You." Deku repeats, unmoved from his crouching position. What's Katsuki supposed to say? He can't say Bakugou because he's pretty much not that anymore, he can't say Katsuki either because no. Motherfucking Kacchan then?

"You know who I am," he says instead. To add insult to injury, his words almost get stuck in his throat. As if he has trouble talking to Deku of all people.

"I don't actually. You're the third fake Kacchan this autumn and I'm getting tired of it. Kacchan's hair is not that pale. Kacchan doesn't pass out for no reason. Kacchan's missing and I would appreciate it if you'd stop pretending to be him and come clean. Are you trying to frame him again?"

He's muttering. *Keep it together, Katsuki. Keep it together.*

"I'm not trying to frame him. I'm goddamn Kacchan you stupid nerd."

"I don't believe you."

"Fuck you then. What do you want me to do about that?"

"Tell me something only Kacchan would know."

Well, okay. That's easy enough.

"You tried to show me how you played All Might with your mom at home when we were three but I knocked down the door to her room when doing the 'I am here!' bit so she banned me from playing."

Deku seems surprised he even remembers that. Katsuki is not about to tell him he remembers ninety percent of those three or so years of childhood when they were friends and he's been doing a lot of unsolicited remembering in his dreams and nightmares.

"At my fourth birthday, you cried because my cake was All Might theme and you didn't want to cut All Might. You couldn't say fortress for shit. We were five when I beat you up at the park for trying to protect some goon with smoke for hair. Once you offered Tsubasa your pants to help him because he shitted his—"

Deku's face looks like a strawberry. "O-okay, that's enough—"

"What, you're buyin' it now?"

Time stops for ten seconds. Then Deku bites his lip. It wobbles, the surface of his eyes going round and glassy. *Oh no. Oh shit. Oh fuck.*

Before he has any chance to react Katsuki finds himself swept by a storm of emerald, pushed backward again, this time with firm arms around his shoulders and soft hair prickling at his neck. He flinches.

"—chan! I knew you weren't dead. I told them you weren't dead. But there was so much blood and the police refused to do anything more than a missing person case and I told them! I kept telling them that you wouldn't be a vi— " Katsuki drags the scarf down from his face and takes a big, trembling breath, swallowing a bubble of emotion in his own throat. For some reason, his instinct to recoil is paused. Deku's touch is now gentle in a way no touch has been in years. When was the last time he got hugged? "—I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I found your house empty and I didn't know what to do—"

"Deku," he interrupts and feels the nerd's welled-up tears fall against the crook of his neck with new vigor. "What the fuck are you saying?"

"What am I—? You've been missing for months! Months!"

"…okay?" Does he care because he's too much of a soft bitch or? "Let me go now."

Deku only tightens his grip. “No. Shut up.” *Huh. This is new*. “It’s been so bad. I’ve been worried sick. Bad things kept happening—”

“Okay. Okay. I get it. Now get the fuck off me.” The discomfort is coming back and he doesn’t feel like passing out again. Deku cranes up his neck to get a proper look at him and only then does their position seem to dawn on him. His hold on Katsuki goes slack and he inches away, coming to rest against the door. They’re both still on the floor.

"Why are you here? Where have you been? Your parents and the police were looking for you—“

"Slow down, nerd, I know they think I’m dead.“ Deku flinches. ”I read the news. You're not gonna tattle on me are you?"

His scarred hands fidget, "I- no." *Not yet* is what he really means. “It wasn’t you, right? At the bank.”

“Course not. You think I’d be that stupid?” He scowls. “But whatever. I came to give your dumbass that dumb letter on your bed —which is messy as hell by the way— that's it. Ain't you got some overnight training bullshit?"

"Oh, you mean the survival shelter training? That's next week." Katsuki is both annoyed and relieved that the schedule he got is wrong. Too much crap has happened this year. No wonder the regular rotation of exercises has changed.

"Then why the fuck are you awake at—' He picks his newly acquired flip phone from his pocket. "—three am, Deku do you even sleep?!"

The nerd scratches his neck. "I *was* sleeping. Woke up and went to the bathroom." That sounds like a lie and the dark marks under Deku’s eyes confirm as much. He looks like he hasn’t been sleeping well in weeks. He doesn’t look okay at all.

"Right, sure, that's nice." Katsuki stares for a beat before turning around and trying to bolt out the veranda door. Deku's hand grips his ankle and keeps him in place. Right now, Deku is stronger than him even without using his quirk. He can't help it, his lips pinch out of habit. The touch is back to being repulsive. "Let me go Deku, for fuck's sake."

"You didn't answer my questions."

"They're all answered in the letter you fuckmunch, now let me go!" Nausea rolls in his stomach. Deku doesn't budge.

"No, I don't even know how you got past security or where you're going after this."

Katsuki is really not liking the feverish fervor that's returned to those green eyes or the hold that's bruising on the thin skin of his ankle.

"Fuck, fine. I'm not going to leave just stop, Izuku." His voice cracks by the end. *What a weak bitch*. "Stop touching me! Please."

Well, that successfully shocks Deku into submission. Katsuki draws his knees closer to his body and rests his arms on them, bowing his head. The curtain behind him tickles his back, ruffled by the autumn wind. *Damn pathetic.*

He hears Deku swallow. "I'm sorry Kacchan."

Katsuki doesn't reply, too busy trying to get the room to stop spinning.

"All of this is my fault. If I hadn't told Aizawa-sensei you would've never gotten expelled, and the League would've never gotten to you and you would've never ended up like this. I- I ruined your dream. If I'd just kept my big mouth shut you could have still become a hero like you've always wanted."

you were never meant to be anything but a villain

"Deku. That was. That was the stupidest four sentences that have come out of your mouth in your entire fifteen years of existence."

The nerd snaps his lips closed.

"You didn't tell Aizawa a single lie, so can it. I made my own bed. And the League was targeting me since the Sports Festival. The most staying a student would've done was save Icyhot from getting kidnapped too. It's not your fucking fault you self-centered prick." He growls. "And what's that 'ended up like this'. Like what, huh? I didn't end up like *anything*. I'm fine. I'm fucking *fine*, you dweeb. So stop looking down on me!"

He's heaving by the time he's done.

"Is that what you think? I've never looked down on you!" Deku says, indignant, "I always looked up to you!"

A pang stings in his chest. *What's there to look up to?* He sighs. "I know."

This is so fucking stupid.

"Why are we talking about my damn feelings when I should be apologizing to you?!"

Deku looks like a dear in headlights. He points a finger towards himself like he's five. "M-me?"

"Do you see anyone else in this room?" Katsuki snaps. "I wasn't gonna do this but, since I'm here, I'm…" *This is hard.* "I'm fucking sorry. I was a shithead idiot who treated you like trash for no reason other than my stupidity and you didn't deserve any of it."

It feels cheap.

Deku's gaze softens. "You're right. It all sucked. But— but I've already forgiven you, even though you were a—an idiot shithead."

"Save it, nerd. You don't get to say that shit when I haven't even made it up to you."

"I always just wanted to be your friend Kacchan. I get to do whatever I want."

Katsuki actually laughs. He doesn't deserve that. Deku makes him mad. So fucking mad. He's so *good*. He's *too fucking good*.

"I get why All Might picked you."

"What—"

"You aren't subtle. All Might looks after you like you're a lost puppy and you yell SMASH every time you attack. 'I received this power from someone.' you might as well scream 'I'm the successor!!'"

Skinny post-Kamino All Might looking exactly like that dude Deku would disappear to the beach with was the final nail in the coffin if the doctor and motherfucking All For One confirming it wasn't enough to go by.

Whatever Deku is going to say next is cut off by a knock on the door. Shit. They both freeze, and Katsuki scrambles to get out of the line of vision. He ends up on Deku's bed, hidden behind the wardrobe.

Deku clicks the door open and Katsuki holds his breath.

"*Mon ami*, is something the matter? I heard a commotion."

Who was he again? Sparkly Frenchman? If he gets busted by this guy of all people Katsuki will off himself out of sheer humiliation.

"Ah, I'm sorry Aoyama-kun. I was studying and lost track of time. You know how I get, with the muttering." Katsuki can't see Deku or Aoyama's (??) faces from here, but that has to be the lamest excuse he's ever heard.

Against all odds, Frenchman buys it. "*C'n'est pas problème,* as long as you are taking care of yourself Monsieur Midoriya."

Deku rolls the ball of his foot into the hardwood. "I am Aoyama-kun, thank you. And I'm sorry again for disturbing your sleep! I'll turn off my lights now."

"*Bonne nuit!*"

The nerd mumbles back a goodnight and snaps the door closed, leaning against it in relief. He flips the light shut and Katsuki's about to complain before he switches on the nightstand lamp to a lower setting. Its glow is thin and oily, just strong enough to illuminate the room.

“He live next door?”

“Who, Aoyama-kun?” Katsuki nods, and Deku makes a hum of confirmation.

“Is he the one leaving cheese on your veranda?”

Deku blushes and looks mildly apprehensive. “I told him to stop doing that,” he mumbles. “I always forget it outside. Waste of perfectly good food.”

A hush falls on the room. Deku’s bedspread is the same one Katsuki remembers him having as a kid. Light bounces off Deku’s seated figure. Katsuki wonders what he’s doing here, what his life has become. Why it’s both easy and hard talking to Deku, and why their relationship is so damn complicated. They’re both fucked. The mint of Deku's One For All is borderline fluorescent.

"The League knows," he says, voice low, and watches as Deku goes

stiff where he's sitting on the desk chair.

"They do? About me and One For All?"

Katsuki grunts. "The doctor who makes the Nomus is the guy you went to as a kid —Tsubasa's grandpa." Deku looks broken up by that alone, better to omit the part about Nomu Tsubasa trying to kill him. "He knew you were quirkless. Mustn't have been hard to figure it out from there. Not sure if Shigaraki and the rest know, but All For One definitely does."

"You— did you talk to All For One?"

"Oh yeah, fucker gave me a whole speech. The only reason I got away is that he thought he killed me." *He kind of did.*

Deku's gaze lingers on the scars marring Katsuki's right hand. "What did they do to you Kacchan?"

"Nothing important." *Nothing I didn't bring upon myself.*

Deku stares. Katsuki stares back. The clock over Deku's desk ticks.

Deku looks away.

He might be crying again.

What a dumbass.

"Everything's in the envelope. All the information they let slip I thought was valuable. There are two other letters in there, for IcyHot and Kirishima. They're real important. Especially IcyHot's one. Deliver them, yeah? And don't snoop."

"Why not do it yourself?"

"God, Deku. I broke in here. I'm dead. This is all sorts of illegal. You think I'd risk finding three separate rooms?"

Deku shakes his head. "No, I don't get why you're hiding. Turn yourself in and come home. You won't get in trouble for escaping a villain organization."

"Come home to what exactly?" Katsuki snaps and hates himself for the guilty look on Deku's face. "I don't want want to go back."

"But your parents—"

"Are better off without me. The League is still looking for me. Any connection puts a bigger target on their backs."

"So you're in danger," Deku says.

"I was in danger the moment I became a UA student. You're in danger Deku. Even that french guy is in danger. It's nothing new."

The nerd swallows. "But—"

"But nothing," Katsuki insists, "You can't convince me to stay. It's either you let me go or I'll fight you. And if you catch me I run away. I'm not staying."

He's not sure if he could beat Deku in a fight as they are now, as much as that sucks to admit. But Katsuki is done being delusional and he knows the only way to overpower buff Deku with his current, comparatively frail body is messing with his quirk, something Katsuki does not want to do. Lucky for him, Deku caves.

"You have a safe place to go?"

"Fucking yes!"

"Okay," he says, "I'll let you leave. But only if you give me your phone number."

"Fucking no!"

"Kacchan, give me your phone number or I call Aizawa-sensei. He lives on campus too."

Damn, Deku's got a scary look on his face. He doesn't seem like he's kidding. *What's Aizawa gonna do? Kick me out again? I don't get these people. Do they like me or not?*

"Tch, fine. You use it to track me down I will break the phone then kill you."

He doesn't want to be shackled again, even if that might be what he deserves.

Deku waves him off, *waves him off* as he copies the number Katsuki recites into his own phone. Holy shit. "Whatever you say."

"Shitty nerd—"

"But… your grades used to be better than mine." This is around the time explosion would've gone off, if it was still there.

"You know what, fuck you. Fuck you and your stupid face. I'm going."

He doesn't move. He doesn't want to go. Katsuki has never liked human interaction but months of talking to strictly psychopaths, old ladies, and book-obsessed librarians have left him socialization starved. He realizes he's *enjoying* this. And Deku, *Deku* is *fun* to be around.

Can one hate something and miss it at the same time?

"You're different," he notes.

“A lot’s happened,” Deku says. “I’ve been going to therapy.”

Huh. Does villain torture count as therapy?

He checks his phone and sees it's past four AM. He's already wasted too much time. Wrapping the scarf around himself, he hops from Deku's bed, sliding open the All Might striped curtain. Cold air meets his face.

“Kacchan, wait!” Deku whisper-shouts from the door as Katsuki is preparing to jump to ground level. Katsuki turns to face him, and the early morning breeze sweeps through his hair. “Are you… are you okay?”

Is he?

What a stupid question.

“Bye, nerd.”

Izuku’s been having a rough month. From the bank business to Kacchan’s death declaration to remedial courses, he’s been stressed to hell and back. It had been especially difficult to explain the bank situation to the class, a good deal of whom thought of Kacchan as a villain and didn’t know what had happened to him.

“—knew it!” says Mineta, sitting smug atop his desk.

“He looked scary, not going to lie…” Hagakure whispers to Ashido. Said girl bites her lip, conflicted.

The moment he'd seen the news yesterday he'd known that wasn't Kacchan. The League had attacked Izuku with a Kacchan look-a-like before. It wasn't him. It couldn't be. He tries very hard to focus on his schoolwork. Number of moles is mass over molar mass, concentration is—

Right by him, Uraraka is speaking to Iida. "I didn't think he'd join them for real. Is he that horrible? They tried to kill us and put Aizawa-sensei in a full-body cast! Is there a chance it wasn't him? Like at—" She stops herself, looking at Izuku. They're not supposed to talk about what happened at the License exam.

Iida frowns, paying no mind to her last sentence. "I do admit that Bakugou had never been… likable, or a shining example of ethics, and he has the precedent, the way he treated Midoriya was unacceptable, though…"

"What's there to question? I knew that guy was insane," Mineta continues. "No one in their right mind would threaten to kill and beat us up while claiming to be a hero."

Izuku thinks about those pictures of Kacchan's cell and feels like he's going to puke. From the corner of his eye, he notices Kirishima sitting stiff in his chair, while Kaminari, usually animated in their breaks, is fiddling with his pen with his head down.

"He was always obsessed with power," Sato points out.

"As horrible as ever. I guess we might end up having to beat him someday —"

The paper of his textbook crinkles beneath Izuku's fingers. When will homeroom start already? He doesn't want to listen to this anymore. The empty chair in front of him taunts him.

"Can we discuss something else," Todoroki says bluntly. Izuku shoots him a grateful look. He knows about what happened to Kacchan too and Izuku's been selfishly glad that's he's been able to share the burden of that knowledge. Remedial classes are tiring on top of the normal coursework, but he's found himself thankful for them. He's been learning a lot —his OFA percentage is up to twenty-five compared to the five he started the term with— and it's a welcome respite from the rest of the class and conversations like this. "It's getting repetitive."

"But that guy is—"

"Stop acting like you knew him," Izuku says quietly, though everyone seems to hear since their half of the class goes silent and the other follows

suit.

“We did—”

“For three months.” He crumples the page of his textbook again. “But if you feel like talking about him, do it when I’m not there.”

“You should know better than anyone! You don’t need to keep defending him Midoriya. Wasn’t the whole reason he got expelled because he b—”

“Shut up.” The temperature of the room seems to drop ten degrees. Izuku doesn’t think he’s ever said that to a classmate before.

“Deku-kun…”

He’s saved by the bell as Aizawa slinks in right on time, looking more exhausted than ever. Everyone scrambles into their seats. His gaze seems to catch on Izuku before shifting away to look at all of them. Izuku keeps his head down for the rest of homeroom.

The rest of that week had been horrible, at every turn he was subjected to bad words about Kacchan again and again and again.

Things had changed, obviously, when Kacchan’s parents had decided to declare him dead and reveal everything that had happened, with pictures too, three of them on top of the two Izuku had been shown.

Walking into the common room after that announcement was like walking into a funeral home. Everyone had apologized to Izuku profusely and the mood of the class had been in the gutter since.

But regardless of his thoughts on the PR intervention, Izuku had no intention of giving up on Kacchan, and he’d scoured forums and online sites for even the smallest bits of information, sorted through piles of evidence, and drawn up dozens of timelines.

Never in his wildest dreams had he ever considered, that Kacchan would just come to him.

But Kacchan was— is different. He seemed washed out, weaker. He’d *passed out* because Izuku pinned him down, and he’d said *please* of all things. Despite the familiar abrasive attitude and swearing, he had an air of fatigue and defeat about him that didn’t align with his image of victory. Whatever happened to him must've been horrible.

Izuku rubs at his tear-stained and reddened eyes. Of course, the

moment Kacchan left he'd gotten into bed, turned up his nightstand lamp, and ripped open the stuffed beige envelope. Izuku doesn't think he could've fallen asleep even if he tried after that.

The envelope itself contained four letters inside, all neatly placed in smaller envelopes. Three of them, each addressed to Deku, Todoroki and Kirishima looked thin, like all they contained was a letter. The fourth package meanwhile, was thicker, perhaps a dozen pages long, and made up the bulk of the envelope. Izuku had placed Todoroki and Kirishima's letters to the side, ignoring the curious voice in his head, and ripped open the one for him.

Said letter is the reason he's having to change his tear-stained pillowcase. He hadn't expected an apology or anything from Kacchan ever, and receiving such a heartfelt one, albeit in letter form, is not doing good things for his emotions.

…I always knew you had potential and spirit to be a hero that was better, different from mine, quirkless or not, and that made me scared. You didn't fit so I was a dumbass and tried to make you fit. You were different from those other extras. You're still different. You better know that…

It means a lot, that the person he'd seen as the epitome of victory, second only to All Might for so long, had apparently believed so strongly in Izuku's ability and will to be a hero it threatened him. That he'd felt this even before Izuku had One for All. It makes sense in hindsight. Once Izuku had realized Kacchan didn't like having him around and stopped following, the boy rarely went out of his way to belittle Izuku. In fact, when his lackeys teased Izuku he'd often draw them away, not in a nice way, but draw them away all the same. It was only in moments when Izuku expressed his desire to pursue heroics that Kacchan got pissed.

His classmates had questioned why Izuku didn't hate Kacchan after the news had broken, why he was so lenient. It had made him start questioning too. Was it weird, that he didn't resent Kacchan anymore than he resented everyone else who hadn't believed in him growing up? Was it weird that he wanted to be friends?

Iyashi-san had assured him that just because he didn't fit the standard response for someone who was bullied, didn't mean how he felt was wrong. He couldn't force himself to hate Kacchan because that's how it "should" be. Izuku had always admitted to Kacchan's bad sides and had no problem cursing him out when he acted stupid. In fact, he'd been fighting back against Kacchan's bullying since day one. He

wasn't brainwashed into thinking what Kacchan was doing wasn't bad or hurtful, because he'd always admitted to himself that it was, that it hurt.

It was more like he saw the good parts of Kacchan in spite of that, and he thought those good parts were worth sticking around for. He'd never wanted to get revenge on Kacchan outside of a few sessions of detention and maybe a slap. He'd wanted Kacchan to be his friend. He'd wanted Kacchan to acknowledge him. That was the closure he'd been looking for.

So he doesn't have a problem with accepting Kacchan's apology. That's not to say there weren't moments when he hated the boy, when he never wanted to see his face again, but Kacchan was, is his image of victory. Izuku had not always been able to stand up for himself, had not always been so resilient, and Kacchan had fostered that in more ways than one.

The first is obvious, but the second is more subtle. Izuku's first inspiration was All Might, but Kacchan was an amazing person far closer to Izuku than him growing up. Watching Kacchan go up against older kids and win had pushed Izuku to further stand up for what he thought was right even if he was quirkless. Watching as Kacchan faced villains with an admittedly deranged smile on his face inspired him to do the same. (More than once he'd caught himself mimicking Kacchan and running his mouth in the heat of battle. He'd even stolen Kacchan's moves.)

For better or worse, he owes a huge chunk of his personality to Kacchan. And that childish part of him, the one that still has a squish on the brilliant sides of Kacchan, has always wanted to be his friend. So he forgives him. It doesn't mean he'll forget, he doesn't think he'll ever forget. Kacchan had hurt him too many times to count for that. He'll forgive, but he won't let himself be treated like that ever again.

Something tells him Kacchan wouldn't do that again either.

He stares at the letter, Kacchan's neat handwriting a little shakier than usual. It's signed off as Dynamight, the hero name Izuku insisted Kacchan have all those years ago, before their relationship soured. Looking at it makes a fresh wave of wetness prickle his eyes.

The second envelope addressed to him sits on his nightstand. He remembers again Kacchan's scarred right hand, the far-off look, and labored breathing when Izuku had held his ankle. He remembers those

godforsaken pictures. Goosebumps rise up Izuku's arms.

Kacchan explained in his letter that whatever happened with the villains was not Izuku's fault, yet Izuku can't shake the guilt, can't shake the regret when he remembers that Kacchan will never be able to live his dream, that Dynamight will never become a reality. He'd never answered Izuku's last question either. Kacchan was *hurt*.

Is he a bad person for being grateful for their somewhat mended relationship when it came after the worst moments of Kacchan's ruined life?

Izuku pushes that feeling down, locks it away to ponder another day, and gets up to pin Kacchan's letter on the board above his desk, right next to Kouta's. Izuku doesn't have many pictures of them, so he takes the single one pasted next to his new photos with Uraraka and Iida and the rest of the class. The two of them can't be older than three, clad in swim trunks and having made a sandcastle together. Izuku has his arms around kid-Kacchan, and they're both looking at the camera.

There are the biggest smiles on their faces, carefree, worried about nothing but the soundness of their little castle's structure. Izuku hasn't seen a smile like that on Kacchan's face in over a decade.

Satisfied with the new arrangement of the board, he reclines into his desk chair, sinking into its seat and spinning around. He rolls over to the bed and picks his phone from his nightstand, clicking it open and pressing on Kacchan's new contact. After a bit of deliberation, he changes it to Dynamight, intent on keeping Kacchan's secret if his phone is ever confiscated by the school.

[You] 06:32

I'm glad you're okay

He places the phone back on the nightstand, sure Kacchan won't reply, but it pings five minutes later.

[Dynamight] 06:37

?????

[Dynamight] 06:38

ass o clock in the morning did u even sleep nerd

[You] 06:38

No.

[You] 06:38

Are you safe? Did you get back to wherever you're staying?

[Dynamight] 06:39

What do u think loser

[You] 06:39

:(

[You] 06:39

Just making sure.

[Dynamight] 06:40

Yes I did get back ugh

[Dynamight] 06:40

Fuck off

[Dynamight] 06:40

U better not give this number to aizawa or some shit

[You] 06:41

I said I wouldn't!

[You] 06:41

So… where are you staying?

[Dynamight] 06:41

That was not smooth deku

[Dynamight] 06:41

Not telling u

[You] 06:42

:((

[Dynamight] 06:42

That colon with two brackets is not doing anything for u

[You] 06:42

>:P

[Dynamight] 06:43

Stop textin me

[Dynamight] 06:43

Fucking bye

[You] 06:45

Wait!

[You] 06:45

How did you get past UA security?!

[Dynamight] 06:47

Quirk sensors don't work on quirkless people

[You] 06:47

WHAT

[You] 06:47

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN

[You] 06:47

KACCHAN DON'T LEAVE ME ON READ

[You] 06:48

ARE YOU SAYING YOU DON'T HAVE A QUIRK ANYMORE??

[You] 06:48

DID AFO TAKE IT?

[You] 06:49

KACCHAAAAAN

[Dynamight] 06:51

Go to school nerd

[You] 06:52

KACCHAN

Chapter End Notes

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NOTES::

1) Satsu (殺) means kill/murder/other such pleasantries. It's a kanji that's also been a part of all of canon Bakugou's hero names. For example his current hero name 大(だい dai)•爆(ばく baku)•殺(さつ Satsu)•神 (しん shin) ダイナマイト (dainamaito). I just thought it's something Katsuki would do bc he's a loser like that XD

2) For anyone looking to imagine him, Satsu is a Norwegian forest cat (kinda like this https://www.thepurringtonpost.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/norwegian.jpg). If you're wondering wtf a Norwegian forest cat is doing in Japan, we'll get more info on his backstory and the exact technicalities of his quirk later. He is just a cat tho. So sorry to everyone who was theorizing he'd be a person. gonna cut your expectations short.

3) If you're confused on quirk levels and why quirkless people have auras, it's mostly based on the fact that All Might is quirkless in the movie but his quirk levels are still 2500AQ. It's like even if the person doesn't have a quirk they still inherited some of those quirk genes from their parents with quirks, just not enough quirk energy to actually form a proper quirk factor. This is only true for quirkless ppl like Deku of course whose parents had quirks. Quirkless people are often referred to as empty cups in the

manga, right? So they have "empty" auras. But quirk sensors are still widespread anyway because most of that quirkless 20% is over seventy. I mean, All Might said quirklessness was rare in his time and he's like 55 minimum, and the manga tells us quirkless ppl are basically extinct by Deku's generation anyway, so.

4) Deku VS Kacchan V2 kinda happened anyway lol. They talked but also left like 334896238765 things unsaid because that's Deku and Kacchan for you. They wouldn't know communication if you hammered them in the head with it.

5) I hope everyone was decently in character. (I'm thinking BakuDeku ended up bantering too fast but sue me the friendship tag is there for a reason.) Deku is 100% tired and will not take any more shit at this point, while Baku is severely emotionally constipated. The class scenes were hard to write because I knew anyone who spoke badly about Bakugou would be getting mad hate lmfaooo even though it makes sense that they don't really trust him. So I made mineta be the ass since he's already our fav punching bag. Shinsou has not yet joined the class btw, since he wasn't physically fit enough to do so right at the start of the second term. So Izuku has had to look at Kacchan's empty seat all term. Yes. I'm mean. :]

6) That said, this is part one of the story officially done. It's been a wild ride. Next part is vigilante chaotic fun times with a lot of angst. But I'll apologize in advance when those chapters pop up for real.

7)There won't be a chapter next week (and possibly the one after that), I'm warning everyone in advance. I have finals and I don't want to start posting the first few chapters of part two without having finalized the timeline properly so yeah. I hope everyone understands. I'll be taking a baby break. (My summer break is soon though which means updates galore so look forward to that)

Chapter 13: A bunch of dominoes

Chapter Summary

Izuku, Shouto and Eijirou discuss what they should do with their letters, Katsuki is a trouble magnet, and something is bubbling on the internet.

(warnings for: non-graphic and very very mild mentions of what has happened to Katsuki, mentions of the kidnapping from ch:11 and the least threatening knife point robbery you'll ever read about ever)

Chapter Notes

I'm back! My finals are OVER !!!!! I think I did pretty okay. I'm still waiting for results but overall I'm feeling good about them. Thank you so much for all your well wishes last chapter and your continued support! I hope all of you have been doing well too! Writing this fic has been so much fun and it's really helped me unwind and feel more at peace with myself. I hope I'll keep going strong until the end (*•̀ᴗ•́*)و ̑̑

Lots of things to note in this chapter oh boy. It was so so so hard to get the characterizations right for Izuku, Shouto and Kirishima. I just can't write them like I do Bakugou. But I hope it's satisfactory and if you've got any tips or constructive criticisms please feel free to fire away. I'm always looking to improve after all.

Reminder that everyone is an unreliable narrator and the long italicized scenes are flashbacks.

AND THANK YOU SO SO SO SO MUCH FOR OVER 20K hits and 1100 kudos. Blows my mind fr.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Midoriya showed up at Eijirou's door first thing that Tuesday morning, looking a weird mix of giddy, tired, and utterly gassed, Eijirou was sure he'd finally snapped from all the pressure and succumbed to some sort of addiction. Maybe energy drinks. He didn't think Midoriya would do drugs. Yeah. No way. He was manly like that. Regardless it was clear something had happened, and whether said thing was good or bad, he couldn't tell through the fervent buzz Midoriya was radiating.

He's always been intense… more so lately… considering everything.

"Dude, are you okay?" he asked, the sleep still not gone from his voice. His flat bangs poked the corners of his vision. He couldn't help but feel unprepared when his hair was down.

"Can I come in?" Midoriya said. "I need *to come in actually."*

"Yeah, uh, sure man, but 'need' to?"

"Something really really *important happened," Eijirou became more alert at an instant, "No—no—It's not bad, I promise, just very important. I almost can't believe it, it's insane. I need to tell you in private though. No one can hear us. I never thought things could've turned out this way and y __"*

He was muttering. "Midoriya, you're scaring me a little. Come in and tell me."

Once the door was closed some of Midoriya's giddiness seemed to wear off, and his expression twisted to the one Eijirou had seen him make when he was thinking up plans in tough situations. After two awkward minutes that felt much more like two hours, he broke the silence and said:

"Kacchan came to see me yesterday. It was the real him, I made sure. He came to deliver letters but I caught him and we talked. He left again about… three hours ago. One of the letters was for you. He told me to give it to you." And he held out said letter, a plain brown envelope with Kirishima on it written in what was definitely Bakugou's handwriting.

Eijirou felt his breath stutter.

Scratch what he'd said about Midoriya not doing drugs because he has to be on something, one hundred percent.

"Bakugou, the one announced… dead, broke *into UA, came to see you and only you in the middle of the night and wrote us* letters. *Willingly. That Bakugou. The one with the spiky hair who screamed a lot. That Bakugou Katsuki."*

And God how talking about him hurt. Eijirou hadn't been able to unglue the image of Bakugou's dusty house and the stench of rotting food from the forefront of his mind for weeks. He'd agonized over it, convinced he was a shitty friend for choosing to give Bakugou space (or perhaps using that as an excuse to avoid the guy now that he knew exactly what sort of stuff he

used to get up to and not knowing if it was right for him to stick around and support that) instead of confronting him outright when he knew better than most that Bakugou was a closed book that wouldn't open unless you ripped the pages apart.

After the camp, he was the first to go after Todoroki with Midoriya because he never wanted to leave a friend behind again.

But when it came to Bakugou, things only got worse, and the knowledge that Bakugou had not only likely been a hair's breadth away from them at Kamino, but had been… had faced that… thing… All For One served as great big heaps of further nightmare fuel. Eijirou had failed to take care of his friend not once, but twice. And the first time had happened because he'd been too much of a coward to face said friend and get his side of the story until it was too late. A coward. Just like in middle school.

How could he call himself a hero or a man? He couldn't.

It hadn't stopped there. Having to listen to the rest of the class talk shit about Bakugou while they had no idea what had happened to the guy was a special type of agonizing, then that thing at the bank fed the hungry fire only for everything to be doused by a big cold bucket of reality a mere ten days later.

It had been hard for Eijirou, but Midoriya had it extra hard, because he had both a bleeding heart and a big piece of himself in the whole conflict, and Eijirou had expected that he wouldn't be able to accept the death of a childhood friend (Eijirou felt horrible and he'd known Bakugou for three months.). He'd expected some sort of lashing out or breakdown.

He hadn't expected Midoriya would come over and recite something straight out of a pipe dream.

It made very little sense. Bakugou disliked Midoriya, UA security was top tier, and the very idea of Bakugou writing a letter was too much of a juxtaposition to stomach.

"Have you slept at all man?"

Those eyebags said no. What if he'd hallucinated all of it? Mistook a dream for reality? It's not that Eijirou distrusts Midoriya, it's that this whole thing is too good to be true. The other boy shakes his head.

"I promise it happened."

That means someone had seen Midoriya that night and whoever it was

might not have been Bakugou at all. Midoriya could've had his room broken into by a stranger. Through some sort of intuition, his classmate seemed to pick up his line of thought.

"I made sure it was him and not some impostor. It's real, Kirishima-kun. I mean it. I haven't opened your letter but mine had things in it only Kacchan would know. Read it and you'll see."

It *was* Bakugou, Eijirou muses. The front of the letter was a very Bakugou written message.

It wasn't your fault that I didn't pick up your calls because I'm a dumbass. Don't worry about me. I'm fine.

Thank you for caring. Your hair is shit but you're still cool. You'll make a good hero. Learn some martial arts and pummel bitches instead of whining about how unimpressive your quirk is because that's bullshit and it's not unimpressive. And ***DON'T WORRY ABOUT ME!!***

The back was three detailed recollections of things he and Bakugou had done together as proof that the letter was authentic.

Call him bare minimum but Eijirou cried for two hours after reading it.

And sure it relieved his guilty conscience somewhat to both know that his friend was okay and he wasn't being blamed but at the same time the obvious display of how Bakugou was trying so hard to be nice and had clearly changed made him feel ten times worse.

Because there had to have been a better way of getting here, a way that wasn't a twisted display of bloated karma in the form of a whole month of villain captivity.

Eijirou doesn't blame Aizawa for expelling Bakugou, and no way does he blame Midoriya for having had enough and opening up in the hopes of seeing things improve. But neither the teachers nor Bakugou's parents seemed to have cared about genuinely getting to the root cause of his issues and helping him fix them. They'd stuck a sloppy solution on a deep-seated problem and hoped it would solve itself from there.

And it kind of did. In the worst way possible.

He twists the doorknob and when he enters Midoriya's otaku room he's surprised to see Todoroki, face a little less flat than usual, staring right at him. Huh, what's he doing here?

"Yo," he says, leaning against the only spot of Midoriya's walls that isn't covered in All Might posters.

"Yo," Todoroki says back, and Eijirou thinks about how much the guy has warmed up since the start of the year. Back then he wouldn't even look you in the eye. He'd be off in the corner with his half ice cube costume being an edgy totally opposite to Bakugou's. Eijirou had never known if he should be awed or intimidated.

Now, he knows that ninety percent of the time Todoroki is a natural airhead and it's kind of adorable. He seems to have missed out on a lot growing up, so Eijirou has been more than happy to help him become versed in the ways of the teenager with Sero and Kaminari. They're friends now for sure, and he sits way up on the manliness scale.

"Ah, Todoroki-kun, Kirishima-kun, thanks for coming," says Midoriya. He sits on his bed and looks at both of them.

"We're here to discuss what we're going to tell sensei about our letters, right?" says Todoroki, as direct as ever.

"You got a letter too?" He nods. Wow, that's a surprise. From the sheer amount of "I'm going to pummel that half-ass bastard half and half into the ground" rants Eijirou had been subjected too he never would have guessed Bakugou would have anything to give to Todoroki besides like… a doodle of a middle finger or something. "What did it say?"

Eijirou is a big fan of expressions on Todoroki's face that aren't his standard flat one most of the time but whatever this pseudo-frown is Eijirou wants it *gone*. "Um…" says Todoroki.

"Nevermind, they're private. Sorry for prying." Todoroki's been having a pretty hard time himself. On top of everything else Endeavor had almost lost that very public fight with one of those Noumu things last week. Eijirou doesn't think he could ever handle the stress of having a pro hero for a dad, much less the number one.

"It's okay."

“But what are we gonna do, Midoriya?”

The green hair boy touches his lips with his fingers. “I… thought we should keep it a secret.”

Eijirou had a feeling he was going to say that.

“Is that a good idea?” says Todoroki.

“Wouldn’t it be unfair, to sensei, to his parents, to the people from the force still looking for him?” Eijirou adds. “And withholding evidence is a crime.”

“That’s true but…”

“What did *he* tell you to do?” Todoroki asks. That’s a good point. They should try to respect Bakugou’s boundaries. They’re not sure how he’s feeling at this point so the fact that he made contact at all is remarkable.

“He made me swear not to tell Aizawa-sensei, and he didn’t give me a location either. He promised he was safe and that was all I could get out of him.” Something in how Midoriya keeps looking down tells Eijirou that’s not in fact “all he could get out of Bakugou”.

“Nothing else?”

Midoriya fidgets then takes his phone out of his pocket. “He gave me a phone number.”

“Dude— that’s huge! You should’ve said that from the start.”

Midoriya fidgets again. “Kacchan made me promise not to show it to anyone. He doesn’t pick up calls but he does reply to telegram texts sometimes.” Then he seems to remember something else. “Todoroki-kun, can you check the second drawer on my desk? There’s a big brown envelope in there. The same as the one your letter came in but bigger.”

The room fills with the sound of rustling papers for a few brief moments, then Todoroki is spinning the chair back to face them with the envelope in hand. He throws it gently to Midoriya who catches it and begins playing with its top flap out of nerves. Eijirou can tell he took great care when opening it, considering the top isn’t ripped even a bit.

“Kacchan gave me this too. It’s a report of everything he learned when he was— when he was with the League.” Goosebumps break out on Eijirou’s skin and he’s pretty sure he sees Todoroki, *Todoroki*, flinch a little. “It’s… very detailed. The villains were sure he’d never escape so they weren’t tight-lipped around him.”

Well.

You could cut the atmosphere with a knife.

“Uh, is it okay if I open the balcony door a little? It’s getting stuffy in here,” Eijirou says after three minutes of deafening silence. Midoriya nods while Todoroki with his built-in thermoregulation doesn’t seem like he cares too much. Eijirou trods to the door and slides it open, letting the November air brush over him and clear his mind. It’s cold, and opening the door is a waste of the AC, but it’s better than suffocating in nothing.

Midoriya coughs and picks back up where he left off. “We’ll have to give this information to the police somehow—”

“But if we tell them about the rest of the letters they’ll want to see them, and they might check our phones and find Bakugou’s phone number in yours.”

“Kacchan said he’d break the phone if I told anyone.”

To Eijirou, it sounds a lot like neither of them wants the police to get to their letters. Midoriya seems hesitant to even give the big report over. It’s like they’re both hiding things, from him and from each other. No one in this room is being fully honest and he doesn’t know how to ask for the truth. It’s driving him crazy.

“Did you read the report, Midoriya?” Eijirou asks.

“Yeah…”

Let’s do a little test. “Can I read it?”

Midoriya clams up immediately, eyes narrowing a millimeter, stance tightening, and left hand moving the report closer to him and further from Eijirou on instinct. The fingers of the other hand curl into his comforter, tugging and releasing the fabric. It’s subtle, someone else might not have noticed a difference. “I don’t think it’s a good idea. It’s… bad.”

On the surface, it seems a normal sentiment. Midoriya is caring, and it's a no-brainer that stories from getting—getting tortured won't be fit for bedtime fairy tales. He's looking out for Eijirou. But, though Eijirou might not be the smartest egg in the basket when it comes to battle planning or academics, he wagers he's pretty good at reading people, and Midoriya right now might as well be screaming unease. There are things in that report Midoriya doesn't want anyone reading under any circumstance, and that's the main thing driving him forward.

Eijirou decides not to keep pushing, familiar with how stubborn Midoriya can get.

"Based on what you've said... I think you should give Aizawa-sensei the report. Tell him you found it in your room when you woke up like Bakugou first planned and say it was the only thing he left. Don't mention the letters or the meeting at all," says Todoroki. Eijirou had never pegged him for a trouble maker but he doesn't appear to care about authority to the same degree people like Iida or Yaoyorozu do.

"That's a good idea but I— I can't. I can't give him this one straight up at least." *So he is hiding something.* "I'll give it to the detective, the one working on Kacchan's case. I trust him."

"Aren't we making this more complicated than it needs to be?" Eijirou had always been taught honesty was the best policy. He felt as though all this needless scheming would come back to bite them in the ass. The adults had messed up with Bakugou the first time, they'd messed up bad, that was true, but they weren't bad people. They wouldn't make the same mistakes twice.

"You're right it's that—" Midoriya pauses as if to contemplate if whatever he's going to say next is worth saying at all. "I'm scared I'll mess up again. This happened because of me in the fi—"

"No way. You know you weren't in the wrong for telling—"

"—Yeah, I know. Kacchan said that too. But you didn't see him. He was trying really hard to keep it together but I could tell he wasn't doing well. He said he had nothing to come back to. He said his parents would be better off without him. I think— I think he thinks he deserved whatever happened to him. And he doesn't even have his quirk anymore. That's how he broke into UA. Because the sensors can't pick up quirkless people."

Shit.

That quirk meant a lot to Bakugou. Heroism meant a lot to Bakugou. It was what had attracted Eijirou to him in the first place, that endless resolve and bottomless determination. He'd never seen anyone who wanted to be a hero as badly as Bakugou in his life. And now that he had none of that? No wonder he didn't want to come back.

"Isn't that more reason to tell the adults so they can help him? We don't even know where he's been staying, he could be in danger. We can't just sit on this information because if something happens to him again I'd never forgive myself."

"But the adults didn't do anything the first time, did they? His parents weren't gonna check up on him for months! If we hadn't shown up that day no one would've ever known he was missing. I told Sensei to help Kacchan instead of expelling him and he did it anyway. Plus I promised I wouldn't tell." The worst part is that he's not wrong.

"I'm with Midoriya. I don't like leaving Bakugou to his own devices either but if we hand over his phone number now they'll find him within the day and force him to come back home. If he doesn't want to do that then there's no point. Whatever solution to his situation he's figured out could be ruined and he'd have to restart his old life all over again."

Eijirou deflates, leaning harder against the wall. He gets where they're coming from, he does. With Bakugou uninterested in coming back on top of whatever they themselves are trying to hide it makes sense that they want to keep things under wraps. And yet, it's still irresponsible, isn't it?

DON'T WORRY ABOUT ME!!

Sorry, Bakugou. That's kind of impossible.

"At least press him to reveal where he's staying so we can make sure he's not kidnapped or something. Or track down his number yourself. I don't know. Something."

"I'll try, but I can't push too much or he might cut off contact altogether," Midoriya says.

A hush falls on the room once again. "If wherever he's staying is safe and good for him I think even Sensei would understand and allow him to do whatever he wants." *Besides, he got expelled so he isn't under the*

school's jurisdiction anymore. "And I don't know his parents enough to comment, but they owe it to him at this point to respect his decisions. I don't think you should've let him go."

"…It felt so surreal that I went along with it. It seemed like a miracle — I never would have imagined he'd show up on my doorstep like that. I guess I got caught up in the moment and didn't think straight about what I should've done until he was long gone," Midoriya admits, pressing at scarred knuckles.

"Don't beat yourself up over it, man," Eijirou says, softening and walking up to the green-haired boy to put what he hopes is a comforting hand on his shoulder, "What matters is that Bakugou is alive. So for now let's go with what Todoroki suggested earlier. What was it again?"

"Giving the report to the detective you're talking about and pretending the rest of the letters and the meeting never happened," reminds Todoroki. With him, Eijirou is never sure if he's thinking deeply or if he's got his head in the clouds. "Then, depending on how well you can manage to stay in contact you can decide what to do from there."

Midoriya exhales and stands up, smoothing down his t-shirt, the one with "pants" written on it. "Yeah, that's good. Thanks—"

The door to the room slams open as Sero and Kaminari waltz into the entry.

"Woah, what are you three cooking up in here? We've been looking for you *everywhere*. Ashido needs Midoriya to practice kicks or something."

Midoriya jolts. "It's Thursday today? *Oh no*, I totally forgot." He rushes to his chest of drawers to look for his gym uniform.

Sero does a once-over of Eijirou and Todoroki. "Why do you look like we caught you with hands in the cookie jar?" then more seriously: "Did we interrupt something? Sorry for barging in without permission."

He lifts his hands in front of him in a gesture of denial. "Nah we… um… we were talking about the upcoming math test… yup, the math test! I'm having trouble with derivatives so I asked Midoriya to explain!"

“There’s no books or papers out though…” Kaminari says. *Shit.* “Damn, Midoriya, you’re that good a tutor that you can explain it with just words? You should help me some time too! I’m even more hopeless than this guy!”

Kaminari slings his arm over Eijirou’s shoulder and Eijirou forces out a laugh as he breathes an inner sigh of relief.

“—but there’s no cookie jar in the room—” He hears Todoroki say to Sero, who snickers at him and starts talking about the latest manga he’s been reading.

“We’ll talk again, ‘kay?” Eijirou says to Midoriya as they’re leaving. The other boy nods and continues to rummage for his gym pants.

They dodged the bullet… for now.

Felix Cat Food… nope… MiawMiaw Juicy Meat… Nah… He walks a little more. *There!*

Katsuki finds Satsu’s favorite *Hagoromo Garomo* on the very bottom shelf and swipes four packs of it, dumping them into his basket. Satsu eats like he’s a cow, not a cat, and at this rate, it might be better to bulk buy his food online. He’ll have to think about that when he gets home. For now, he looks over his basket again and mentally checks the items off the list.

It’s a bit late for shopping, but he’d lost track of time today with taking care of the shop solo because of Koharu’s conference and couldn’t skimp on getting groceries, so whatever. The convenience store says 24/7 for a reason and who’s gonna stop him from showing up at midnight when the stores are open anyway? Exactly.

The store he’s in is a small always open joint some blocks away from where they’ve got the entrance to the shop set up, about a fifteen-minute walk. He’s come here before and their shit is decent and well priced, plus it’s more of a local store so there aren’t as many shoppers. As long as he keeps his face and his hair covered he’ll be in and out within a quarter. Right now, there’s no one in the store at all except Katsuki and the sleepy clerk with a streaked orange aura. Small blessings.

He walks past the drink and ice cream refrigerators to head for the spice and seasoning section and restock on a couple of things, ginger and sesame seed oil and red pepper flakes. He hears the sliding doors

open. The store smells of air conditioner and stale coffee. Katsuki breathes in through his scarf to drown it out. The tips of his fingers are numb from the constant temperature changes. This is what he gets for getting pissy about wearing gloves.

As Katsuki empties his cart of items so the cashier can scan them, it's getting harder and harder to stop himself from doing something embarrassing like drooling at the thought of having a nice bath back at the shop. He's so tired. Twenty minutes from now he's gonna be having a long pleasant soak—

"Give me all the money in the register or you're dead."

—or not.

There's a dude with his face half-covered standing right next to him, a bit taller than Katsuki, middle-aged and out of shape and poorly wielding a big ass kitchen knife. Great. His aura is a clear blue that stays close to his skin because it looks like his quirk is a mutant type if the scales covering him are anything to go by. The cashier jumps at the sight of the knife, looking very much awake, and scrambles to conceal his attempts at reaching for his phone.

"Oi," Katsuki says to the knife guy, "I was paying for my shit. Wait your turn."

The cashier drops his phone like an incompetent moron while the knife guy turns to Katsuki and stares as if Katsuki is speaking another language. Katsuki's eyebrow twitches. "Didn't your folks teach you not to cut in line—?"

"Line? What line? This is an armed robbery you fool!" the guy says, waving his knife around way too close to Katsuki. "You, zip it and you, empty the register stat. "

"Don't you dare touch that register *I swear to god*—" Katsuki rubs his forehead as he addresses the cashier. "Call the damn police—"

"G—gentleme—"

"EMPTY IT!"

"Fucking no. I'll kill you if you listen to him Orange."

"*I'll* kill you if you don't."

“Fish headass you’re not gonna kill sh—” Fishy promptly lunges at Katsuki with movements so slow and telegraphed an ant could predict them, and all Katsuki has to do is step to the side then grab his arm and twist it behind his back to get the knife to clatter to the floor and get him immobilized.

“Let me go!” whines fish, squirming like well, a fish out of water. The surface of his scales is slippery and hard to keep a good grip on, so Katsuki pushes him over the counter and holds him down by his rough shirt. “Let me go—!” He smells bad, and not in the fish sense, in the mustn’t have had a shower in quite some time sense.

“Can ya get a rope, at least?” Katsuki asks the stunned cashier, who jumps out of his skin at being addressed, “I doubt you got handcuffs…”

“Right— right away!”

Katsuki waits impatiently and Fishy doesn’t stop squirming, going as far as to push himself across the counter to look for some sort of weapon. It’s clear that he’s got neigh zero combat ability and even less experience though, so he’s no match for Katsuki. He seems to be mumbling some shit under his breath. “All I wanted was money for food—” Katsuki hears.

So he replies with his standard answer to that type of bullshit, “Get a job.”

Fishy laughs. “Get a job. Get a job you say! Hah. Must be nice to be young and naïve. You have any idea how the real world works? No one respectable will hire a bum over fifty, and you’re ”overqualified“ for all those other minimum wage jobs. Who in their right mind is gonna take someone who looks like me as their waiter? Not even the most washed-up of washed-up joints.”

It’s true, Fishy is kind of ugly, he looks like a goddamn fish after all. Katsuki frowns but his hold on the man’s shirt remains tight.

“And education or experience doesn’t matter. You can get axed at any time. I lost my job during the recession five years ago and no one’s wanted me back since. Thirty years of work experience and every door I knock on stays closed because I look like this—”

First kidnapper lady now this guy. How is Katsuki supposed to solve all these financial problems? Villains are supposed to be “I want to destroy society and torture babies.” not… this.

“Um, I found the rope?” Katsuki takes it from Orange and ties Fishy up. Fishy doesn’t stop fighting for a moment. He’s persistent, Katsuki will give him that. After wrapping him up a good five times for paranoia’s sake Katsuki shoves him on a chair the cashier has behind the counter and ties him to the chair by the legs and chest for good measure. Overkill? No such thing.

“Thank you so much—” Orange bows at the waist. “I don’t know what would’ve happened had you not been here today!”

“Probably nothing. You would’ve given him the money, he’d have left, then the police would’ve traced him by cell phone. He said he did it cuz he was hungry, don’t think he has what it takes to actually kill people. You’d need a three-day hospital stay for a stab wound at worst.”

Orange looks queasy, did Katsuki say something wrong? Stab wounds aren’t that bad. Or well, it depends. “…Right, um… thank you either way… You said he was hungry?”

“I don’t even have cash for utilities,” pipes up Fishy, having realized his chance, “Even a stale loaf of bread would be enough.”

“You—”

Katsuki is this close to dropping dead from fatigue where he stands. “Listen, can you scan the rest of my shit so I can get out of here and you two can do whatever?”

“Oh that won’t be necessary, everything you bought is paid for. A small show of gratitude if you will.”

That’s fucking dumb. “I didn’t do that to get your shit for free. Take my money or I’ll kill you.”

Orange squeaks and rushes behind the counter to finish tallying up Katsuki’s items. Once he’s got everything in his bag he all but leaps to the exit. “Watch out for Fishy being a weirdo,” he gives the cashier one last warning before getting the hell out of the store.

“Wait! Tell me your name!” calls Orange.

“No!”

He speedwalks away, the ever imminent threat of the police showing up before he’s far enough from the place hanging over his head. He

checks the time on his phone. 00:23. There are three new texts from Deku. A part of Katsuki regrets agreeing to give him his phone number. *I should destroy the SIM*, he thinks.

Later, once he's back home and fed and bathed and comfy on his futon with Satsu warm at his feet, he finds he can't fall asleep, staring instead at the moonlit wooden ceiling.

Fishy's words ring in his brain, and not for the first time, he gets the terrifying thought that he's been extremely lucky. It could've easily been him driven to petty theft to survive had Healer Hag decided to kick him out as any sane person would. And he may be well acquainted with what it's like to live in conditions of less than nothing, but some of the things he'd endured for a month people had been enduring for years.

He doesn't have to worry about making ends meet and where he's gonna shower and where he's gonna find something to eat. He doesn't have to worry about people looking at him weird because of his quirk (Well, people did look at him plenty weird at one point, but that's different because he sucks so he deserved it, probably.) since it's now nonexistent. He has no room to complain when the aftermath of what happened to him is pretty much an ideal scenario. When he has a person who likes him and a cat who likes him and a roof over his head and food on his table. And a fucking job too, hell, he's got everything by a normal person's standards even though he doesn't have the slightest idea of whether or not he deserves it.

So why is it that when Deku and his brain ask, "are you okay? are you happy?" the only answer he can spawn is "I don't know" or a deflection?

Did his childish dream of heroism matter to him so much that he's irreparable without it even though he knows the only thing it did was twist him into a piece of crap?

He's not sure that he knows anymore.

Sana-SOL(@*solsana*) wrote,

2xxx-11-01 22:12

Why I've been IA (looking for identity of mystery rescuer)

I announced a hiatus two weeks ago because we'd be visiting Japan for my great grandmother's ninety-fifth anniversary. As many of you know, I started this blog to practice my Japanese writing skills, as a half-French half-Japanese person living in France, and it's served me well, way better than I'd ever imagined. I'd never give this page up, so for anyone worried—don't be. As for why I haven't been posting in over two weeks now, something crazy happened to me on my trip that threw things off balance and my four-day stay turned into a ten-day stay without me realizing. It's been stressful and scary and a little bit unbelievable, but let me tell you the story.

My little brother is a huge drawing nerd so I took him to visit Ginza Itoya on a day we had some spare time. In hindsight, it was stupid of me to leave him to wander around alone when he's not fluent in Japanese, but I wanted to allow him to pick his own things without pressure, wanted a break for myself, and got lazy thinking it would be safe since he'd been in plenty of stores unsupervised before and we'd had no problems. Japan doesn't even allow public quirk use, it's super safe! Things are a bit different after All Might's retirement, but generally, it's a lot better than the US or the bad parts of Paris.

Regardless, it was my mistake, because someone dressed as a store employee took advantage of my negligence and kidnapped my brother.

Now, before you worry or panic, it's okay. My brother came home safe and sound and wasn't hurt at all. He was asleep for pretty much the whole thing. But the whole reason I'm writing this post is to talk about the person who saved my brother. Because had they not been there, I'm not sure where I'd be right now.

My brother described them as pale with off-white hair and most of their skin covered. They spoke rudely and must've noticed that the employee was behaving strangely because they followed him and my brother to the emergency exit, confirmed with my brother that he didn't know the store employee, and then straight up punched the guy. My brother was put to sleep for the rest of the scuffle, but two hours or so after he'd first disappeared I got a call from his phone. At this point I was hysterical, having long called the police and searched every centimeter of the stationery store.

And this person, I assume it was them at least, says to me like we're speaking about the weather: "Some people tried to kidnap your brother. The car burned down before they could. You might want to come pick him up."

Of course, I lost my mind, because how are you supposed to reply to that sort of statement? I think I almost had a heart attack, seriously. Then they said: "I'll text you the location, better hurry," and HUNG UP.

When the police got there they didn't find my brother's rescuer, but they'd left a neat report on his phone to explain what had happened. True to word, the kidnappers' van was burning down some ways away from them, and if the report is to be believed, this pale mystery person not only stopped my brother's kidnapping but also rescued him and the kidnappers from the hazardous van. And they didn't even wait for a thank you.

I'm not writing this story to get attention or fame or whatever, I'm writing it because I'm genuinely baffled and blessed. And if any of you reading happen to know who this person might be, or hell, if you are them, please let me know. I have no idea how I or my family could ever repay you. We owe you everything.

***[** And if anyone thinks I'm making this up, feel free to read one of the many official news articles right here.*

Burning van on the outskirts of Tokyo linked to kidnapping scheme. Kidnappers disguised themselves as shipping and chain store employees to target children or young women, often foreigners. Two perpetrators under arrest and one wanted. Crime stopped by mystery party. Could be related to a larger trafficking ring[...] **]**

[image] 22,984 likes | **1,728 shares** | **2,009 comments**

MIGHTYWW(*@mightww*) wrote,

that is crazy.

noonw(*@randomprp*) wrote,

so this is wtat the sirens a few weeks back were about

JoeMo(*@squijok*) wrote,

Things have been wild since All Might retired.

morilovr(*@ririrmo*) wrote,

couldn't the police use your phone call to figure out his voice?

Sana-SOL(*@solsana*) replied, ↲

I'm not sure why, but it came out warbled. It was already very staticky when we talked,

and the recovered recordings were almost indecipherable. Too much interference. It's why

I couldn't tell if they were male or female either. The kidnappers might have had more to

reveal or more details to give, but I'm not privy to that information. Follow the news if you're curious.

heroWATCH OFFi(*@eiyuuwtchr*) wrote,

Looks like now that All Might's gone it's not just villains who've upped their game. We've got new vigilantes around too.

FUCK ENDEAVOR(*@endvanti*) replied, ↲

how do you know they're a vigilante?

heroWATCH OFFi(*@eiyuuwtchr*) replied, ↲

A hero wouldn't hide from the police.

FUCK ENDEAVOR(*@endvanti*) replied, ↲

but vigilantism entitles quirk use. OP didn't mention a quirk anywhere.

heroWATCH OFFi(@*eiyuuwtchr*) replied, ↲

IDK. Causing interference seems like a quirk to me.

Besides, there should be camera footage from the store too.

I wonder why they're not releasing it.

FUCK ENDEAVOR(@*endvanti*) replied, ↲

i guess we'll have to wait and see.

Chapter End Notes

1) I've decided to remove the double spacing from the paragraphs for aesthetic's sake. Please ignore the inconsistencies with the use of honorifics vs Mr/Mrs. I'll be fixing all of that throughout this upcoming week. I'm super super sorry.

2) the cat food brands are brands I found on amazon.jp

hagoromo garomo: https://www.amazon.co.jp/-/en/Amazon-Limited-Hagoromo-Variety-Chicken/dp/B07JKDWNBG/ref=zg_bs_2155309051_9/355-4816853-8271313?_encoding=UTF8&psc=1&refRID=1TNTREBGA6ZPYHANY68H
miaw miaw: https://www.amazon.co.jp/-/en/MiawMiaw-Juicy-Meat-Plus-White/dp/B00F9U22JI/ref=zg_bs_2155309051_10/355-4816853-8271313?_encoding=UTF8&psc=1&refRID=1TNTREBGA6ZPYHANY68H
felix: https://www.amazon.co.jp/-/en/Felix-Grilled-Adult-Gelatin-Salmon/dp/B00TPFB4FQ/ref=zg_bs_2155309051_8/355-4816853-8271313?_encoding=UTF8&psc=1&refRID=1TNTREBGA6ZPYHANY68H

3) the formatting for the blog post at the end is taken from this guide https://archiveofourown.org/works/15664164 I altered it

slightly and added the comments myself. We'll be seeing more social media stuff like this as Katsuki keeps vigilante-ing

4) it's very amusing to me that the line "take my money or I'll kill you" is in character for Katsuki. even when he was at his suckiest he was thinking about paying taxes. delinquent model citizen

5) we didn't get Todoroki's POV much this chapter because we'll be getting that next chapter

6) the kids are definitely overcomplicating everything T_T but they're stupid and rampant with trust issues. I sort of wanted to show a difference between kirishima who's had good adult role models in his life and believes they'll do the right thing vs todoroki and deku who have front seat lessons on just how negligent adults can be and are more willing to do stuff on their own. plus they do both have secrets. shouto is the only one who knows about dabi's identity because Katsuki only mentioned it in /his/ letter, while Izuku can't show Katsuki's report to Kirishima or Aizawa because it's got OFA stuff explicitly mentioned in there and that would entail spilling the secret.

7) one thing I struggle with writing-wise aside from too much telling and not enough showing is an overreliance on gestures or exaggerated movements. but on the flip side, I feel like it's excusable because that's how these characters in the series canonically act. it's an anime and manga thing. Katsuki himself is a super hyperbolised sort of heightened reality character. So yeah, it's a constant back and forth T_T.

8) Katsuki still hasn't worked at the shop enough to find a "new calling" if you will. He will eventually though. Half this story is about him learning to be happy, even if it might not seem that way at first."

9) god idk I'm super nervous about this chapter but... I'm posting it anyway lmaoo

10) this "arc" is going to get so dark I apologize in advance seriously

Chapter 14: The trials and tribulations of Icy Hot (feat. cases and conferences)

Chapter Summary

What does Icy Hot think?

(nothing super graphic, but warnings for domestic abuse courtesy or Endeavor, mentions of bullying and suicide baiting, yk, the standard warnings that come with early bakudeku, kidnapping and very light descriptions of bakugou's captivity.)

Chapter Notes

Im so sorry for being off schedule TT

a lot of people have been asking about the schedule, and I usually update weekly on saturdays/sundays. Sometimes we may veer off schedule (like today) but generally I try to stick to it. I'm also super sorry for not being able to reply to every comment. I assure you that I read and appreciate every single one.

this chapter... I think it's the longest I've ever written. It's over 10k words. Longer than number 12. I mean, just shouto's POV took a whole 8k words, and I probably could've gone more in depth with it... But got have I been itching to post, so fuck it, here it is.

Reminders that every POV is limited to one person (meaning we only understand the other characters how the PoV character understands them, which may not necessarily be accurate) and everyone is an unreliable narrator. There are a lot of flashbacks in Shouto's sections, so to avoid overusing italics, everything that happens in the past is written in past tense, and present scenes are written in present tense. For Shouto's POV, the small exam portion is what he's currently doing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Koharu surveys the conference schedule while she waits for opening time. The seats of the hotel lobby are soft, and the area is just starting to bustle. It’s still quite early after all.

If she’s honest, she had no real reason to book a hotel room. They

moved the shop to Nara on purpose so they'd be only an hour away from the venue, and she could manage fine, walking to and from the area each morning and afternoon. She didn't need to stay at the hotel overnight. But she opted to do it anyway, first to save herself the hassle of covering her trail when she goes back to the shop (here, she's Iki-sensei only, a humble researcher, with no connection to the clandestine little Sun shop, none at all) and two, to give Katsuki a taste, a trial of what taking care of the store on his own is like and show that she trusts him.

It's the 26th annual Quirk Researcher's Conference, and Koharu has attended every single one since the very first. Things have been stagnating the last few years, so she contemplated skipping this time, but a few presentations on the schedule caught her eye. Matsumoto-sensei with some actual new evidence on the quirk singularity, Ueno-sensei with a proposition for a new category of quirk, and Matsui-sensei with a short presentation on first aid. Those, plus the discussion tables, will make it worth it, she'd wagered.

"Hey, Auntie." She startles at the familiar but not quite voice, turning towards it with the dread she reserves for having to talk to family members. "Oops, sorry. Did I scare you?"

Sitting one space to her side, her niece smiles that small smile, mouth corners quirking up as she pushes her ponytail of dark blue hair behind her back. It's a lot longer than Koharu remembers. Then again, it's been five years since they last saw each other, maybe more. Aoi has grown up a lot.

"Fancy seeing you here. Grandpa and dad complained they were too old for this," she says, leveling Koharu an amused stare.

Koharu huffs, shuffling her papers into a neater pile. "Haruki I can understand, but your father?" She hums. "I suppose he was always lazy."

"I'm telling him you said that."

"Go ahead."

Aoi laughs, the corners of her golden eyes crinkling. "I've missed you, Auntie. You're always such a stranger."

What can she do? With their mother out of the way she could probably reintegrate herself into the family, but her older sister has, as Katsuki would say, a stick up her ass the size of Mt. Fuji, while she

and Haruki get along like a cat and a mouse, even if they're far too elderly for their old theatrics. Over half a century's worth of bad blood can't just boil over in a couple of days after all, and Koharu hasn't bothered to put in the effort either. She shows up for family gatherings every other year and she answers the phone. That's as good as they're gonna get.

"You've grown up a lot, Aoi-chan," she deflects, pinching her niece's cheeks. She's long lost all her baby fat, so there's not much to pinch. Her memories of Aoi don't go far beyond her memories of every other of her (far, far too many) nieces and nephews and grand nieces and grand nephews, but Aoi had always been particularly smart and curious in spite of her shyness, so she's not the worst, as far as family members go.

Aoi blushes, pulling her face away. "Well, I am twenty-three now." Oh wow, time sure flies.

"Are you here in Haruki's stead?"

"What?" She makes a gesture of denial. "No, no, I'm here for myself. Need to build up those published and presented articles. I'm working on my thesis, you know."

"Bachelors?"

"Masters." Koharu flips through the schedule and indeed **BS. Hiryo Aoi - An experimental study on interpretations of the quirk factor** is set for 16:15.

"You're that far already?" She's impressed.

"It's pretty standard. I still have two years to go, and I've barely written half the draft for my thesis…"

"Regardless, it's good progress. I'm curious about your presentation. I was planning to spend the afternoon in the discussion room, but I think I'll stick around for you."

"Oh no, you'd better not make eye contact or I might end up hiding in the bathroom." She complains, playing with her fingers, though there's an obvious raise to her shoulders. "But auntie, how have you been? You holding up okay?"

"So so." Koharu waves a dismissive hand. "You know how it is with old age. My body just won't cooperate sometimes." Her lungs in

particular have been pesky as of late, but they had a tendency to act up. Seeing the trickle of people in the lobby increase, she checks the time on her pocket watch. “Let’s go get ourselves seated in the conference room, shall we?”

As she hobbles through the hall Aoi tails her like a shadow. “There’s this rumor going ‘round ya' know, Auntie, that you’ve got yourself an assistant,” her niece stage whispers. Haruki’s side of the family always had a flair for dramatics. There's something more there though Koharu can't decipher.

The mention of Katsuki makes her think about him for the third time this day. He hadn’t been lying when he’d told her “I don’t half-ass shit” because the moment he’d accepted the job he’d doubled down and gone above and beyond to study everything she advised him to. She’d known he was a top student even among top students, but for some reason, his work ethic kept leaving her pleasantly surprised. He’s a strong kid. Stronger than he ever should’ve needed to be.

“So it’s true then, your mystery assistant?”

“Hmm, it is.”

“Um… This is a wild guess of mine, and you don’t have to answer—” Aoi leans in so no one else will hear them. “—Do they have anything to do with that kid you had gramps help you out with way back?”

Koharu frowns. “Haruki needs to learn to keep his mouth shut.”

“He did, trust me,” she says, “The rest of us sort of eavesdropped.”

“Then he needs to learn to keep his doors closed.”

“You’re ruthless.” If it keeps Katsuki safe, she’s glad to be. “But— Ya’ know what else I heard? That this assistant of yours can touch quirks.”

She supposes that little fact won’t stay little known for long, considering Katsuki needs to use his ability to get better with it. Though she hadn’t expected things to spread quite this fast.

“No comment.”

Aoi hums thoughtfully, pushing the double doors of the conference room open and holding them there for Koharu to pass. They walk towards the rows of seats closer to the front to find their assigned ones. Aoi’s seat is two rows above Koharu’s, but since the hall is far

from full, she sits down next to Koharu so they can continue talking.

“And ya' know, I got a call from Mera-san, about this assistant—”

“Absolutely not. You know I don’t deal with the HPSC,” Koharu grinds out, harsh. There was no way those vultures would ever get their hands on Katsuki.

“I had a feeling you’d say that. So I told him I had no idea. Good call, right?”

She nods, relieved. “How does Mera know to contact you anyway? Has he found out…?”

“He doesn’t know we’re family, no, so don’t worry about it. He just knows I frequent the shop. I guess he must’ve thought he could get something out of me— oh, look, auntie! That’s Shuzenji Chiyo, she’s Recovery Girl. She works at UA.” Aoi subtly points to a woman about Koharu’s age, sitting in the far corner. Koharu squints at her.

She doesn’t know how to feel about these UA people. Aside from her disinterest (at least compared to other people) in heroes in general and her intense dislike for how UA operates, she might have a bit of a grudge against them for abandoning Katsuki like that. Though she’ll admit that she’s as biased as it gets. Shaking her head, she looks away.

“Aoi-chan, are you familiar with a lot of researchers?”

Aoi blinks. “Ah, well, I’ve been coming across a lot while looking for inspiration for my thesis.”

This might work. “And do you know anyone who wears green-tinted gold-rimmed glasses? A short, sort of chubby man with a bald head but a bushy grey mustache.”

“Isn’t that Garaki Kyuudai? He’s the guy who first proposed the quirk singularity. Wait a second.” She produces her phone from her pocket and taps away at it. Two seconds later Koharu is looking at the image of someone who fits Katsuki’s description to a tee. His face sends an ugly shiver down Koharu’s spine. Is he the one who…?

“He’s like super old though. Isn’t around much. I heard some senpais talking about how he never shows up to this kind of stuff anymore— hasn’t in decades— even when you have people like Matsumoto-sensei presenting new supporting evidence.”

By god is he lucky he's not here. Aoi would've had to stop Koharu from committing murder by cane battery if he were.

"Why do you ask?"

"Nothing in particular…" She coughs. "And before I forget, let's go for a coffee during lunch break. I need to talk to you about something." As the hall starts to fill up she ushers Aoi away and gets comfy in her own seat, trying to clear her thoughts and focus only on the presentations ahead.

"So that's about it, Tsukauchi," Keigo says, leaning back into the chair. Tsukauchi has a nice office. Keigo is jealous. "They're pretending they have some secret up their sleeves, but I honestly think they've got no idea where this Bakugou-kun is or how he made it out of that lab. I've never seen him around the compound either. He's not on their side. Or if he is, they're hiding him well."

"Which doesn't add up."

"Yeah. They were quite eager to display him to the world with that bank stunt. It wasn't him then. Not sure who, either Toga or a Twice clone, but it wasn't the real kid and that much is for sure." He fiddles with his nails. "Plus, they've issued a request in the underground for contact by anyone who spots or captures him. What's the need to make wanted posters for someone who's already on your side?"

"So *where* did this kid go…" Tsukauchi mutters under his breath. That's the money question, isn't it?

"It's your job to figure that out," Keigo says lightly.

The detective sighs in frustration. "Either way. Thank you for your help, Hawks."

"Oh, it's nothing." Keigo gives an easy smile. "I'm doing this anyway so…"

And if he's honest, he's a bit curious too. Mostly because this Bakugou case is proving to be way more complicated than Keigo had imagined when Tsukauchi approached him for this favor. This kid was like a ghost, and no one really knew what had happened to him, not even All For One, who was the last person reported to have seen him.

Keigo wanted to know what it took to go against All For One and…

win?

(And he felt kind of bad for the actual kid, even if he seemed like an ass.)

He stands. “This might be the last time I get to come over here like this,” he admits, “Sorry, but I’m gonna need to be a lot more careful with my movements from now on.”

Both the commission and the league will be tightening their leashes, and if he doesn’t play their game to a tee, he might get burnt on both sides. He’s got no idea how he gets himself in these situations.

Tsukauchi nods in understanding.

“I’ll keep investigating on my own, but I doubt I’ll be able to share my findings…”

“It’s okay. You’ve helped more than enough already.”

He wishes he could do more. He wishes he could do whatever he wanted.

But the world doesn’t work like that, does it?

“I’ll be going then—”

The door slides open to reveal a UA student with curly green hair. He’s kind of familiar, Keigo thinks. The student’s eyes widen upon seeing him.

“Hawks—!”A fan?

“Yup. That’s me.”

“Oh my god— I’m a huge fan! You’re amazing. In just four years you rose to number three, and now to number two. Your quirk gives you wings, and they’re incredibly versatile, and a single feather can hold the weight of an entire person—”

“Woah, kid, calm your engines.” He’s said all that so fast Keigo could barely keep up with him. Does this kid eat newspapers for breakfast? He notices a brown envelope on the floor, one labeled something like “report”. “And you dropped your papers.”

“Ah yes, right,” the kid says, leaning down to pick up the file at lightning speed.

“Morning Midoriya,” Tsukauchi greets. The name rings another bell.

“You’re that crazy kid from the UA Sports Festival! The one who was breaking his fingers like crazy.”

The kid— Midoriya, flushes, but he holds Keigo’s gaze. “I don’t break them anymore.”

“That’s good.” Keigo can tell it’s taking a lot out of Midoriya to keep his attention peeled away from Keigo out of politeness. It’s kind of cute. He’s a hardcore fanboy.

“I had something to show you, Tsukauchi-san. It’s important.” Some sort of understanding seems to pass between them, and Midoriya is near buzzing with energy. Keigo is curious, but he takes this as his cue to leave.

“I hope we’ll get another chance to speak soon, Tsukauchi,” he says on his way out.

When Shouto came to UA, he wasn’t expecting to make friends. He wasn’t expecting his life to change at all.

He’d work hard with his ice, keep avoiding his fire, and prove to his father that the half of his quirk he’d agonized to have Shouto inherit, the half he’d ruined an entire family over, was unnecessary for Shouto to be a far better hero than Endeavor ever was.

He’d focused on it to an obsessive degree, honing his ice to the maximum. Part of it was to get back at his father, but part of it was because he had nothing else to do. Up until his final year of middle school, Shouto’s schedules and daily activities had been monitored and measured to a third decimal point. His diet was fixed and unchangeable, he wasn’t allowed to watch TV, use the computer or own a personal cellphone, he was supposed to follow a strict training regiment on top of maintaining his grades.

At school, he’d have no idea what the other kids were talking about, and though Fuyumi and Natsuo were allowed to see him, the years of distance had made things awkward.

With no friends, or hobbies, or anything to do besides brood and train, brooding and training were exactly what he’d done.

He isn't sure what pushed him to challenge Midoriya the day of the sports festival, his resemblance to All Might who Shouto had been created and tailored to defeat or something else entirely, but he'd done it, he'd done it and it had marked a turning point.

Under the push of "It's your power, isn't it?!" and long-buried memories of admiring All Might as he sat on his mother's lap, he'd let his flames go free and actually felt good about it. He'd found himself smiling even as he used a power he'd resented for as long as he could remember. It was the first time he'd ever thought "fighting can be fun", and "I want to do it again".

Then came the finals against Bakugou, and the soaring high turned into a crushing low. The slightest tingle of heat under the skin of his left side made him feel sick, and try as he might, he couldn't, couldn't replicate the perfect storm of the semi-finals, so, tired beyond belief, he'd given it up, put up a wall of ice around himself big enough that Bakugou's howitzer wouldn't injure or kill him, and allowed himself to lose.

It didn't feel good, but using his fire in that situation might have felt ten times worse, so he didn't regret it.

Bakugou himself was a mystery. He'd been impossible to ignore from the first day of school, and Shouto had easily noticed, that behind his loud, brutish personality hid calculated, delicate movements that were necessary with a quirk like that, where one wrong move could leave your opponent with a missing limb, or perhaps dead altogether. And despite being an asshole, Bakugou was good, really good.

He had confidence and full control of his body to back it up, this on top of a strong quirk, sharp mind, and the instincts and reflexes of a monster. It was commendable, how he'd defeated every single one of the opponents in his tournament bracket with a different strategy each time, and Shouto wasn't even sure if using his fire would have been enough to beat the Howitzer, which seemed especially designed to counterattack and suck up a huge vortex of flames.

He'd felt bad for Bakugou during their match, and he'd felt bad for him when he'd woken up to find him chained to a podium and losing his mind. For some reason, Bakugou felt everything turned up by twenty notches, and it was almost sad how frustrated he seemed, at the audience, at Shouto, at himself.

After the festival Bakugou had again slipped his mind. Shouto could

respect his strength, but he didn't understand why Bakugou was so intense, why he screamed so much, why he acted like a feral alley cat with murderous intentions instead of a normal human.

So for a while, Bakugou existed as a background presence who occasionally broke into the foreground to challenge Midoriya then tack on a "YOU TOO TODOROKI!" with far too loud a voice. Meanwhile, Shouto kept making friends. The thing with Stain established his little group with Iida and Midoriya. Midoriya was easy to talk to, kind, and worked hard, while Iida came from a hero family (though a very different one to Shouto's) so they had quite a lot in common.

Add to this Yaoyorozu, who he'd somewhat bonded with from the very beginning due to their shared status as recommendation students, Shouto had himself a friend group for the first time in perhaps ever. He'd gone to see his mother and they'd talked things out too. It was good. He finally thought he might understand what happy meant, and he finally felt closer to a point when could say it and mean it.

Then, Midoriya came back from his first term final without Bakugou in toe, wearing an air of frustration and guilt, and Shouto had felt something shift.

At first, he'd thought his friend had failed the exam and was in the dumps about it, but that didn't seem quite right.

"I heard some second years whispering that the security bots dragged Bakugou out of here kicking and screaming a little while ago!" Ashido announced after running back into the classroom, looking confused and winded. Midoriya flinched. "What happened?!"

No answer.

"…Deku-kun?"

Gritted teeth.

"K-kacchan— he—"

"What did Bakugou do Midoriya?" Shouto found himself asking, growing increasingly alarmed at his friend's haggard appearance. He'd never liked how Bakugou treated Midoriya and the blond was a wildcard, but the weight of this situation seemed far bigger than a simple fight.

Midoriya shook his head, and Shouto was pretty sure there were tears dripping down his chin. “S-sorry guys. You waited for me and everything, but I’m walking home on my own today. So go ahead without me, *please*,” then a quieter, “I think I’m gonna be sick.”

Like that he’d sprinted away, likely for the bathroom.

He, Uraraka, and Ashido stared at each other in worried confusion. They’d been the only ones who’d stayed so late. Ashido because she needed to take a late train, he and Uraraka to wait for the end of Midoriya’s exam so they could walk home together.

“Should someone follow him? He didn’t look very good…”

“I’m worried about him, but I don’t know if he wants anyone with him right now,” Uraraka said, biting her lip.

Shouto’s phone buzzed in his pocket, and he flicked it on to find a flurry of texts from Midoriya.

I meant what I said.

I’m sorry for making you wait but I really need to walk home on my own today.

I’m gonna be fine, my house is close by.

Go ahead.

Please.

Shouto wasn’t very good with people but every nerve ending was screaming at him *not* to leave Midoriya alone. He looked at Uraraka, who was also scrolling through her phone, in uncertainty, (though that face didn’t look very different from his usual face) utterly out of his depth. She met his eyes with little comfort to offer.

Did you fail the exam?

It took five minutes for Midoriya to reply.

No.

So what was it then? Had Bakugou failed? Had they had another scuffle? Had something else happened?

I’ll tell you tomorrow.

Please go home without me.

I need to head to gym gama to get changed anyway.

Please.

With nothing else to do, they'd bid goodbye to Ashido and walked home together, just the two of them. Despite Uraraka's admirable attempts at making pleasant conversation, a heavy air of discomfort weighed on them all the way home.

The next morning Bakugou's chair was empty. He was absent. Bakugou was never absent. The class was buzzing with whispers.

"Bakugou was expelled," Aizawa-sensei said at the very start of homeroom, shocking them all into silence.

"Huh?" Kaminari said dumbly, echoing the question a lot of them were asking themselves in the privacy of their own heads.

"The faculty thought it best to expel him." Sensei's gaze seemed to linger on Midoriya. "His behavior didn't fit the standards of the school."

Shouto supposed it made sense. Bakugou didn't make for your typical picture of a hero, crass and rude and uncooperative. But Shouto also knew that heroes weren't all saints. His father had gone to UA too, after all. Plus, Bakugou's behavior so far hadn't earned him more than a light scolding. Going from that straight to expulsion seemed… odd. Something must've happened yesterday, that marked the final tipping point.

He looked at Midoriya's back. He'd closed in on himself, seemed to be making himself smaller. His scarred hands sat on his pants, clenching and unclenching in nerves or frustration.

Shouto wanted to get up and ask him what was wrong, what happened. But he couldn't —they were in class. "About the training camp coming up—" Sensei had moved on, and the tone of his voice made it very clear that he wasn't interested in a deeper dive into the previous topic. Shouto flip-flopped from his staring at notebook to staring at Midoriya's back for the entire hour.

It was during lunch that the rumors got to him. Shouto wasn't much

interested in this kind of thing. He could be called “out of the loop” and if he was honest, he didn’t mind. He thought rumors and backtalk were a waste of time.

“—he was insane!” whispered a girl who might be a third-year.

“I mean, we all heard that speech. ‘I’ll win.’ who says that as a first-year? It’s no wonder,” replied her friend. Shouto caught onto their conversation because they were in front of him on the line to Lunch Rush.

As he was walking to their usual table he picked up on more whispers.

“He looked like a villain at the Sports Festival. What kind of hero gets that pissed over winning? I swear I could see steam coming out of his ears.”

“That’s what I said. Just because he was strong… he always seemed more like a villain than a hero.”

“Oh thank god— that guy pissed me off by looks alone.”

“Eraserhead is scary… I’m glad we don’t have him—”

“I heard he tried to kill that green-haired kid who breaks his fingers. Yuki-chan saw him come out of the bathroom crying—”

Okay, Shouto had thought. *I need to know what actually happened.*

But Midoriya was like an iron fortress under siege for the entire duration of lunch. He’d only reply to questions about school, pick at his food, and from time to time, stick his gaze to the table where Kaminari, Kirishima, Sero, and Ashido sat, today one of its seats empty. He didn’t look like he’d slept at all, and in typical Midoriya fashion, whenever Uraraka tried to angle the conversation to get him to open up, he’d somehow close any holes in his defense and turn the attention back to them. He was good at this. Way too good.

But even the best of the best would eventually waiver, and when they returned from lunch to find a lot of classmates discussing the issue, Midoriya couldn’t take it anymore.

“Kacchan… Kacchan got e-expelled for— for bullying me,” he announced, and while there were a few gasps, most weren’t surprised. Shouto for one wasn’t. They all had eyes. They could see how

Bakugou treated Midoriya. “We argued during our exam. It was supposed to help us cooperate but Kacchan didn’t want to.”

“What’s his problem with you anyway?” someone asked.

Midoriya took a deep breath and tried his best to keep his voice level as he explained.

“We were childhood friends because we grew up in the same area. K-Kacchan was always amazing since we were young. He could do anything, and a lot better than the other kids. Meanwhile, I couldn’t, so he’d get disappointed, and eventually, he started picking on me. My quirk came in late too, like —I only used it for the first time on the day of the entrance exam.” This elicited several gasps, and Shouto himself was shocked. No wonder Midoriya broke his bones so much. He’d barely had his quirk for six months. To Shouto, whose breaths had been freezing his drool since he was a baby, a life like that with no quirk at all for so long was unfathomable.

“—so everyone thought I was quirkless until then. They used to tell me I couldn’t be a hero without a quirk. Used to call me worthless. Well, everyone else laughed at me, Kacchan was the one who was cruel over it. Every time I said I could do it he’d put me down. I— I don’t know why.” He sucked in a breath and his voice cracked.“I don’t know— I don’t know why he hates me.”

“Deku-kun, your thirteenth notebook — the burnt one— did Bakugou-kun do that?” The whole class tensed.

Midoriya nodded, and briefly, Shouto was mad. The kind of mad that sparked memories of attempting to protect his mother from his father’s restless tirades, shaking useless, too tiny fists that were no match for all two meters of Endeavor.

“I think he told me not to go to UA then did that… or something.” A wistful look crossed his face for a split second. “A lot— a lot happened on that day.”

The class erupted into talk. Todoroki saw Uraraka go up to Midoriya to give him a hug, which he seemed to desperately need. Shouto was grateful to her for how good she was with people.

“Well good riddance then,” said Mineta, “I never liked that guy.”

Mineta was one to talk. Shouto didn’t particularly care. He didn’t have a deep connection to Bakugou. As long as his friends were happy, he’d

accept anything. If Midoriya liked it, he'd respect the decision.

"I—I never wanted him to get expelled," Midoriya muttered, silencing the class again. "Maybe early on I hoped he'd get moved to class B, at most, but that was it. Being a hero has been his dream since forever. He might not get to— like this. He's been improving a lot this year, and ever since the day he blew up number thirteen he never did anything to me again in middle school."

"That's still more than enough."

"You didn't deserve any of it."

"You're way too nice Midoriya."

"If I were you I'd never want him to go near me again."

Midoriya sighed. "Kacchan… Kacchan's not a bad person. He's done bad things but he's not bad at heart. He's serious about being a hero."

"I dunno… he treated everyone so poorly. Are you sure he didn't like… gaslight you?"

"What—" It was said in a sharp way, in a way Shouto had never before heard Midoriya speak.

"You know, where abusers make their victims believe they did nothing wrong and it's all the victim's fault—?"

"I *know* what gaslighting is*,* and I *know* Kacchan did a *lot* of things wrong, but—"

The classroom door swung open and everyone startled, jumping back (or in their seats, if they were seated).

"Heyo little heroes—" Midnight-sensei blinked at them, "—why are you all so alarmed? Did I interrupt something interesting?"

A frown stretched across her face when no one was willing to answer. "…Alright then. Get yourselves seated. We have a pop quiz today."

There was a collective groan, and, like that, any previous tension was washed away.

It got worse the next day.

It was on the news. Everything was. Clips of Bakugou being dragged out of the school like an animal, written (unflattering) accounts from his middle school days, audio recordings of him saying the vilest shit, among which:

“If you want to be a hero so bad, take a last chance dive off the roof, and maybe you’ll find a quirk in the afterlife.”

Shouto knew the moment he’d heard it, who it had been directed to, even if the recording contained nothing to betray the victim of those horrible words. And he was mad all over again. Midoriya didn’t deserve to be treated like that. Bakugou didn’t deserve Midoriya’s forgiveness, no way in hell.

He tried to think about anything that could make someone hate Midoriya to such a degree and drew a blank. There was nothing. Midoriya had been nothing but nice to Bakugou. Shouto couldn’t understand.

Then came the guilt. He’d never paid much mind to whatever Bakugou and Midoriya had going on because he’d deemed it their business, and it was obvious they had history the rest of them couldn’t understand. He’d thought it would be better if he didn’t stick his nose in until Midoriya himself decided to share. Maybe he should’ve done something different? Pressed more?

When he arrived at school it was chaos. Everyone was talking about Bakugou, about how bad he was, about how Midoriya deserved better, and the only one who seemed well and truly uncomfortable with the whole ordeal (aside from Kirishima, who’d looked a mix of queasy and constipated since yesterday’s homeroom) was Midoriya himself.

“Is it weird?” he asked Shouto during lunch, poking at his katsudon unenthusiastically. “Am I wrong?”

“For what?”

“For not hating Kacchan.” Shouto didn’t know how to answer, so he allowed Midoriya more time to talk. A part of him was happy, that Midoriya was at last opening up, letting Shouto help him like he’d helped Shouto. “I know it’s not a gaslighting thing because I know what he used to do to me sucked and I didn’t deserve it. But we were friends once, Todoroki-kun. He— this feels gross to say— but he’s a big inspiration for me. I wanted us to be friends again. I wanted him to become better and I wanted us to sort out our issues. I’ve never wanted ‘revenge’ or …this. Is that wrong?”

I just wish we could be a normal family.

Looking at his friend, it was impossible not to think of Fuyumi, not to see her in his eyes. Fuyumi who'd been brushed aside and forced to fulfill the roles of a mother and caretaker in the absence of their real one, who was as much a victim of their father's as their mom and Natsu and… Touya. Fuyumi who still wanted to piece their family back together regardless and experience a slice of normality.

Shouto didn't understand how Fuyumi could hold so little in resentment, but he'd never thought he had a right to demand she hate their father like Natsu did. Like Shouto did. He couldn't force her to feel a way she didn't, and wanting apologies and reconciliation was no less valid than never wanting to see a person who hurt you again.

"Honestly, I don't understand what you see in Bakugou. I don't think I'll ever be able to see him the way you do. If I saw Bakugou again right now I'd probably punch him. Multiple times. But, I don't think your feelings are wrong. I don't think feelings can be wrong. My older sister —she's sort of like you. And I don't think she's wrong either."

Midoriya continued to play with his food, but the way he held his shoulders seemed more relaxed. "Everyone keeps saying I should hate him. But I *don't*. I can't. Not permanently. I don't know. I feel like I'm going crazy."

"I think… what matters is your feelings, and what's better for you. If letting resentment go is better for you, then it's fine to do that… probably."

This was far from his field of expertise, but Midoriya did seem a little better when he raised his head up to give Shouto a small smile. "I'm sorry for laying all that on you all of sudden Todoroki-kun—"

Shouto frowned. Midoriya did that a lot. He was always willing to lend a helping hand to others, whether they asked for it or not, but, he loved to close the doors for everyone else to return the favor. "It's fine… It's what friends are for, right? …We… help each other out."

His smile grew wider, seeming more genuine. "Yeah. Thank you, Todoroki-kun."

Of course, a single talk wouldn't be enough to sort out the mess in Midoriya's head. He'd snapped at the class to stop talking about Bakugou around him that afternoon anyway.

With time, things began to fizzle out, talks of Bakugou stagnated, they got to leave school for summer break and everyone seemed to move on. Midoriya himself was getting therapy and seemed better, the few times he and Shouto had met up, though this cloud of regret that he'd never get the reconciliation he'd craved with Bakugou seemed to follow him around.

When the first day of August rolled around, Shouto woke up with goosebumps on his skin. From what, he didn't know.

He checked his phone after breakfast to find five hundred texts in the class group chat, and a single message in their group chat with Sensei in it.

The date for the camp has been changed due to technical difficulties. Meet up location stays the same.

The moment he'd laid eyes on Midoriya as they boarded the bus that would take them to camp, Shouto knew something was wrong with him.

He didn't look like he was sleeping, and sometimes he'd zone out and stare at nothing like he was thinking about a ghost. Kirishima was the same. He'd look lost, like he couldn't understand how whatever had happened, happened.

Shouto didn't pry. He even gave Midoriya a little lecture on not prying.

Then he got kidnapped.

"Hero society is rotten. It throws people it deems worthless to the side, labels them villains for the smallest mistakes, while heroes are allowed to get away with anything. They can make all the mistakes they want, wrong all the people they want, and the fault never falls on them. You're familiar with that sort of thing aren't you, Todoroki Shouto, with Endeavor being your father and all."

Shouto twitched in his restraints. The bar smelled musty, and the schoolgirl with the blonde hair had been licking her lips every ten minutes while staring at him since he got here. Shouto wasn't sure how long it had been. The one with the hands seemed to be their boss,

and for some reason, he wanted to recruit Shouto.

He'd been monologuing for hours at a time, multiple times, while the rest of the villains killed boredom doing other things. The lizard man played with a handheld console, the warp gate that was at USJ too washed dishes multiple times a day, the guy in the skintight suit played whatever games he and the schoolgirl could come up with, then there was the one with the blue flames and the scars. The one who'd helped set the forest ablaze.

Dabi, Shouto thought. Something about him rubbed Shouto the wrong way. He acted uncaring and nonchalant most of the time, was quite the Stain fanboy. But then, occasionally, Shouto would catch him staring.

And these stares had personality. It seemed like he wanted to strangle Shouto on the spot but at the same time wanted to tease him, like he was privy to some secret detail he found highly amusing that was going right over Shouto's head. Shouto twitched again. There was something familiar in the ghost of Dabi's fingers on his neck, in the tilt of his voice, in the blue of his eyes.

If Dabi threw that amused glare his way again, Shouto thought he might just lose his mind and demand answers on the spot.

But for now, he was busy with their boss.

"—Isn't that right, Todoroki Shouto?"

"I wasn't listening to a word you said," he admitted blankly and swore he heard someone sputter. "I'm not interested."

He knew it was in his best interest not to antagonize Shigaraki, but he had no intention of joining the people who'd tried to kill him and his friends multiple times, and he didn't think he could lie about it either.

"He's so much quieter than the blond one," said the schoolgirl, offhand, and Shouto felt it when his stomach dropped. What?

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there was another one like you, Shou-chan, he was blond." *There's plenty of blond people in the world, right?* "But he was way more fun. He screamed a lot, and he insulted us. " *Lots of blonds scream and insult, right?* "I miss him. You're boring compared to K—mnhp." Twice covered her mouth then the warp gate said:

“Watch your words Toga.” The schoolgirl pouted upon being released but didn’t utter another sentence.

There are lots of blonds who scream and insult whose names start with Ks, right?

What did they mean? What did they mean by another one like him? Shouto’s mind couldn’t stop spinning. He’d been so lost in thoughts and possibilities he hadn’t even noticed Twice coming up to unclasp his restraints, probably on Shigaraki’s orders.

He hadn’t noticed but his ice worked on instinct, and the moment he was free it shot out, completely filling the room and trapping the villains. Shouto braced himself for the counterattack that was bound to come, eyes moving fast from one villain to another, trying to pinpoint who’d get free first, when the doorbell rang.

“Hello? Kamino L.A. Pizza?”

Then the wall exploded.

He’d made it out. He’d made it out, but, as he looked at All Might’s sunken form on the big screen, surrounded by heartbroken cheers and Midoriya’s silent sobs, he’d thought, at what cost?

“How could you be so weak Shouto?! How could you allow yourself to be captured?! Did all my training amount to nothing?!”

He couldn’t stop a flinch as his father’s flaming fist came into contact with the wall of the training room, searing the wood despite its fireproof coating. He felt eight years old all over again, smoking at the seams, puking his guts out on the floor as Endeavor loomed over him like a shadow promising pain. His father had laid off on the corporeal punishment, and Shouto hadn’t allowed him to lay a hand on him for a little over two years now, but the fear was ingrained in him like a reflex.

A reflex that showed up whenever fire bubbled under his skin.

Endeavor slammed his hand against the wall again, snarling. “Not like this! I never wanted it like this—!”

In some sick twist of fate, Shouto *had* done it. He *had* fulfilled the duty he was created for. He’d ended All Might. Shouto *knows*. That it was

his fault. His old man doesn't need to remind him.

Endeavor was now the number one hero.

"Shouto—!" There was so much fire in his father's eyes Shouto was sure he'd beat him right then and there, like he used to do when Shouto was smaller and couldn't produce the flames he was looking for.

Then, the door slid open.

"Shouto, come have dinner," Fuyumi said, her voice at regular volume but laced with some sort of danger.

They both froze.

"Fuyumi!" their father bellowed after snapping out of his shock. "Leave! This does not concern you—"

She walked forward and faced their father head-on in a way Shouto had never seen her do before. She planted her feet firmly on the ground and glared up at him. She was nothing in front of Endeavor, he could probably grab her and throw her out of the property like a javelin. Yet, something about her in that moment felt larger than life. Shouto shivered.

"It doesn't concern Shouto either," she said with ease, eyes shifting to the still steaming scorch marks on the wall. "Sort out your problems on your own dad. Shouto's coming to have dinner. Or else it'll get cold."

They glared at each other for a single, tense moment, before the old man gave up and turned away, scowling. "C'mon Shouto."

He walked to Fuyumi in a daze and stepped out of the too hot training room without sparing his old man a glance. Behind him, Fuyumi slammed the sliding door shut so hard a picture on the wall beside it titled on its hook. He heard Fuyumi breathe a sigh of relief.

"You didn't have to do that nee-san," Shouto said, not making eye contact. He could protect himself.

"Let me be a good sister to you for once Shouto," she breathed, coming closer to him. "Besides. He's never hurt me anyway."

Shouto flinched. Fuyumi had wrapped her arms around him. Thanks

to her snow quirk she ran cold, and the feeling was a welcome change from the heat the training room radiated. Unused to embraces or physical affection, he stood there like a stick and let Fuyumi hug him.

She was shaking horribly, and Shouto could feel how hard her heart was beating against his chest. “I’m so happy you’re home safe Shouto,” she whispered against his shoulder, and Shouto felt himself relax, however little. “Your nee-san was so worried.”

Eventually, she let him go, and they walked to the kitchen side by side, ignoring the thuds and crashes from the training room behind them. “I made soba,” she told him when they sat down, wiping at the corners of her reddened eyes.

True to word, two plates of cold soba were laid on the table, alongside two steaming cups of soup and Shouto’s stomach grumbled in hunger. He slapped his hands together and mumbled: “Thank you for the food.”

He was filled in, on the Bakugou situation.

He’d have almost preferred if he hadn’t been.

Because, unlike Shouto, no one had been there to rescue Bakugou.

Shouto had never had a particularly deep connection to Bakugou, but no one deserved *that*.

He’d been *there*. They might have been in the same block of buildings. If Shouto had told the classmates who came to rescue him about what he’d heard Toga say, maybe they would’ve gone back to find him. Maybe they could have saved him. They’d been right next to the factory, pressed up against its wall, for a moment however brief. But Shouto hadn’t said or done anything. And that might have made all the difference.

Thanks to everything. To his anger against his father, to his guilt, to the unshakable discomfort of knowing the fate of a person he’d studied and worked alongside mere months ago (a fate he could’ve shared). Thanks to all of that and perhaps his own weakness, he’d failed the provisional license exam.

“Todoroki… I didn’t want to say anything the day of the home visit,

but is your father abusive?"

Shouto had a hard time looking Sensei in the eyes, even though the man was trying his best to make him feel as comfortable as possible. He shifted on the couch of the empty lounge.

"He—"

For some reason, it was difficult. Shouto had never had a problem before, admitting he hated his father and his father's training. But, faced with his Sensei, the words seemed to get stuck in his throat.

"Nothing leaves this room if you don't want it to, Todoroki. I don't care if your father is the number one hero or the number one villain. I care about *you*."

Shouto had never heard Sensei admit that so openly before.

"He used to hit my mom— enough that she got so scared my left side terrified her. That's how I got my scar." He swallowed as an excuse to stop talking. This was way harder than telling Midoriya. "He married my mom and had us to get a kid with a quirk strong enough to beat All Might— since he couldn't on his own…"

"Is that tied to why you wouldn't use your fire, at the start of the year?" Aizawa-sensei asked. Shouto gave a curt nod.

"Did he hit *you*?"

"Yeah, in training." And that was all he said. Shouto didn't like thinking of himself as a victim. The way the old man had treated mom was far more unforgivable to him than anything he'd done to Shouto himself.

Sensei sighed. "Alright… You don't have to go home on the weekends or breaks, and if you want I could speak to the principal about removing c—"

"No." He didn't need a court case. If the number one hero faced domestic abuse charges right now on top of the public's already lukewarm opinion of him, it was guaranteed to end badly. Plus, Shouto and Fuyumi and Natsuo and— and mom, might need to testify, and Shouto didn't think any of them were prepared for that.

"It doesn't need to go through the court. It can just be a private thing. Endeavor might give up custody willingly—"

But he also might not. “It’s fine Sensei. Now that I’m at the dorms I won’t need to be home at all, and my father is busier than ever. The rest of my siblings are adults.”

“Okay then,” Sensei conceded, “But if you ever change your mind…”

“I know. Thank you.”

“And before you leave,” he turns to face Sensei again, “You do know what happened at Kamino wasn’t your fault, right? Because it wasn’t.”

Shouto believed in actions over words, but hearing those words out loud meant a lot more than he’d ever imagined they would.

He started going to therapy too.

For some unknown reason, his father began to change.

“I’ll be a hero you can be proud of,” he said. Shouto side-stepped him and walked away. He’d need to be a lot more than a good hero.

But it was good, the change. It was something.

Midoriya was a mess. Were it not for therapy and their remedial classes (which offered a respite from both their unknowing classmates and the constant reminder that was Bakugou’s empty seat) Shouto didn’t think his friend would manage to hold himself together. He hoped something would give. Some clue would pop up.

As morbid as it was, even a body would do. So everyone involved could at least get closure.

His wish came true, though not in the way he’d wanted it to. Bakugou was robbing a bank one sunny morning, with Dabi and a Nomu in toe.

When he got to school that day Midoriya seemed about ready to lose his mind.

“It’s not him,” he insisted. “It doesn’t make sense.”

Shouto didn’t say a thing. He tried his best to get the class to lay off on the anti-Bakugou comments that entire week, for Midoriya’s sake more than anything.

Bakugou was announced dead around two weeks or so later, and the mood of the class could be described as the mood of a “kicked puppy” (at least Shouto thinks that’s how the expression works).

“How long has he been missing?” Iida asked Aizawa-sensei at the very end of homeroom, in a voice lacking its usual passion.

“Since late July.”

“No way—”

“So all this time we’ve been…”

At the very least he didn’t need to worry about the class making Midoriya feel worse anymore.

Shouto dodges a flurry of debris, manifesting a bridge of ice to soften his fall. Sweat drips down his face but he’s got no time to rest, another masked exam proctor is coming at him with renewed vigor, and he simply freezes the guy to his spot before breaking into a run to join up with the other testees.

“There should be civilians stuck under the wrecked buildings,” Midoriya tells him and Camie. He’s still kind of uncomfortable around her, but it’s a lot better than it was at the start. “Shouto, you should be able to stabilize the wrecks with your ice, so it would be better to head down there while Whirlwind is keeping Gang Orca busy.”

“Got it,” Shouto says in reply, “But I’ll be coming back once I’ve got everything secured. We’ll need all the firepower we can get for Gang Orca.”

Midoriya— or rather Deku nods at both of them and takes off, heading for a building on the leftmost side of the field. He and Camie also split up to maximize the number of civilians they’ll be able to save.

(No one is really in danger of course, and the “civilians” are paid stunt doubles, but they have to pretend this is real because once they get their licenses, it will be)

The building he heads to is smoking, and when he enters he finds an entire room on fire. It licks at his skin, faintly warm compared to the burn most people would feel. He’s fireproof after all. He needed to be. It’s why his father had abandoned Touya.

Shouto stared at the brown envelope. The characters for Todoroki, written in thick, even strokes, stared back at him.

Once again, he was at a loss. He was glad when Midoriya showed up to his room that morning, looking at the same time exhausted and more energized than he'd been in weeks, shoving a letter into his hands and enthusiastically muttering about how "Kacchan came to see me.". Even if they hadn't been close, Shouto was glad to know Bakugou wasn't six feet under, but the letter, he'd had no clue what to do with.

He didn't get Bakugou. What would Bakugou have to say to *him*?

The answer laid on his bed, but, he was hesitant to open it. This whole thing reeked of strange.

Finally, after a quarter-hour of one-sided staring, he picked up the envelope and ripped the top open, letting the letter fall into his lap. It was a single page, but packed with writing from front to back.

Dear Icy Hot.

Shouto wasn't the best at picking up social cues, much less through letter, but for some reason, he felt as though Bakugou was making fun of him.

Sorry that you got kidnapped because of me. I was supposed to kill you as my villain debut or something, but I told All For One no and he got pissy and a bunch of other irrelevant things happened. I'm still mad at you for being a half-assed fighter.

Had he ascended to a different dimension? Bakugou had *apologized* to *him*, and over something he had laughably little control of? Perplexed, Shouto kept reading.

It was a mistake.

Anyway, that Dabi guy is your brother.

A train may as well have crashed into him. He was holding the letter with his left hand and he almost set it on fire. Was this Bakugou's idea of a practical joke?

I knew about your tragic backstory since the sports festival. You and Deku need to stop having tell-all makeshift therapy sessions in public hallways. Deku is not a shrink even though he acts like it. (He's not All Might's secret

love child either, I've met his dad, but nice try. That one was funny, I'll hand it to you). Endeavor's a weak bitch who couldn't beat All Might on his own so he did what weak bitches do and tried to make other people do shit for him, which is why he married your mom and had kids 'till he got to you and your perfect quirk mix, right? And he's a bitch that hits you.

I already knew that part, but I was sitting in my cell, and Crusty comes over and brings me a meat bun for no reason. I start eating. I ask him where he's going because I'm high out of my mind and super bored. He says they're kidnapping you. Says your name like you murdered his kitten. I call him out on it. He starts talking all "Shouto" and "my plan" and I'm high so I squint and he starts looking like you, so I tell him "You his long lost brother or something?" and Crusty says yes and starts telling his version of your tragic backstory.

Shouto is stunned. The casual ease with which Bakugou writes about cells and drugs and villains is jarring. His grip on the paper, strong enough to rip it with one wrong move, tightens further. This has to be a joke.

…But it's not a joke, is it? Because what follows is a speedrun of details from his childhood Shouto hadn't even told Midoriya, hadn't told *anyone*. Some of the things Bakugou mentioned, *Shouto himself* hadn't even known about. This was real.

Dabi was Touya.

He was very much alive.

And he'd helped torture Midoriya's childhood friend.

I told him he was saying bullshit. Should go get a job instead of whining and committing arson. Told him all of us were going to the same dumpster because I'm a bitch, Endeavor's a bitch and he's a bitch too. Told him he was jealous because you got more attention from Endeavor than him. He got mad and kicked me. I kicked back and told him I'd string him up by his staples. Eventually, I puked and he left. That was about it. He said he wanted to dance with your old man in hell and was planning to kill you in front of him. He's a real dick. Does it run in the family? Thought you might want to know.

It's a lie. It had to be. Right?

But then he thought back to his interactions with Dabi, to how familiar he seemed, to the amusement in his everything, to his strange obsession with Shouto and th— his father. It had barely been a week

since he'd sicced that evolved Nomu on the old man and given him a scar to cover half his face. *That*, was Touya?

I didn't mention anything about your brother in Deku's letters. He's too nosy.

And that was the end of the letter. The back was just detailed recollections of some of the few interactions he'd had with Bakugou to prove it was him. Shouto didn't even bother reading them, instead pulling out his phone to search up pictures of Dabi, and while there weren't many that were high-quality, the resemblance was suddenly uncanny.

His father's eyes— the exact same shade of icy blue, his mother's nose, a bit pointed at the end, the slope of her shoulders— it was all there. Hidden by that horrible disfiguration, yet still there. How had he not realized? How had *none of them* realized?

His mind answered his own question. No one knew to look. They thought Touya was dead. He'd gone up in a blaze that had wiped out a whole forest. There'd been nothing left of him but a piece of jawbone. Shouto had thought about the story too many times, stared at the shrine with his older brother's picture on it for hours on end, in secret.

What was going on? How had Touya survived? What had happened to him?

Shouto felt sick.

A knock on his door startled him so bad he dropped his phone in his haste to stuff the letter under his comforter. As luck would have it, he'd remembered the lock.

"Todoroki, man, you okay in there?" came Sero's concerned voice. Only then did Shouto register how much the temperature in the room had dropped. "I know we said we'd try making a skating rink with your quirk one day, but you've sort of iced the whole floor."

He was right. Shouto's room was as good as a fridge, and the thin layer of frost spread beneath his door and likely, into the hallway. Right away, Shouto activated his left side enough to make the ice start evaporating.

"I'm fine… I kind of lost control," he called without getting off his futon, still looking at the pictures of Dabi on his phone.

“That’s unlike you, and your voice sounds a little wobbly—” Did it? He brought his fingers to his cheeks to find tears wetting them. Oh. When had he started crying? “—Are you sure you’re good?”

“Yeah, I am.” He lies. “Sorry about the ice.”

“I’m not really worried about that—”

Shouto sucked in a breath, closing his phone and rubbing away his tears. “I’m fine, I’ve just been a bit stressed from remedials.” He was bad at lying. It felt wrong. But he couldn’t tell Sero the truth either.

“Okay then.” He could hear Sero shift against his door. “You… know you can talk to me about whatever, right?”

I’ve made another friend, he thought. “I know,” he replied loud enough for Sero to hear.

But there were some things you couldn’t talk about with everyone.

“Help! Help—!” He hears, and it snaps him out of his stupor.

The voices are coming from upstairs, so he leaps through the fire to get to them. It’s two actors hidden in the corner of the room, dressed in protective gear but doing a good job of pretending they aren’t.

“Remain calm,” Shouto instructs, remembering protocols, then stands in front of them to encase the whole room in a layer of ice just thick enough to put out the fire and nothing else. “Any injuries?” he asks and one of the models points to their left leg, which looks like it’s supposed to be broken. Shit.

He doesn’t have splints or crutches— they don’t fit anywhere on his costume. “I’ll carry you,” he announces before turning to the other civilian, “Can you walk?” They nod and like that, Shouto holds the “injured” civilian on his back and makes the other walk behind him, icing out the fires bit by bit until they’ve made it outside. He drops off the civilians in the designated area and goes back into the building to check for anyone else.

There’s no one. Camie and the other testees look to have handled the other buildings, so he turns to the main field where Inasa has been going toe to toe with Gang Orca.

“What’s going on?!” says someone behind him, and Shouto’s eyes

narrow on a gust of wind that's gone astray and looks about to collide with a building. Wasn't that the one Midoriya headed for earlier? He makes to head over but it's too late. The wind hits the side of the building hard, shattering all the windows on the top floors. Right then the building's ceiling erupts upward, and a blob of green flashes from it, carrying several other blobs.

The thing is, they're not falling down. Not at a normal pace at least. Midoriya looks like he's floating in midair, or swimming in some liquid everyone else can't see. "What the…?"

But they have no time to stop and consider, because Gang Orca's attacks remain relentless. Shouto hops into the fray, catching Inasa's eye. He gives Shouto a smile, understanding passing between them, and prepares a whirlwind for Shouto to feed his fire into, creating a hurricane of controlled flames.

Warmth tingles beneath his skin and lights the sky a beautiful palette of reds and oranges and yellows. Looking at his fire, Shouto thinks of Touya again, of Dabi, and the pyre seems to shine and burn brighter.

He's going to pass this exam, and he's going to have a talk with Fuyumi and Natsuo.

They'll figure out some way, they have to figure out some way, a way to save Touya together.

Chapter End Notes

oof.

1) it's been so fucking hot over here, consistently over 32-35 degrees. I'm melting and our house doesn't even have AC. it doesn't help that the heat makes me sleepy. i usually use a text-to-speech program that reads the chapters for me to check the flow and help with noting spelling mistakes, but the robot voice with the heat is like a double whammy sleep inducer. i fell asleep a good three times while editing this.

2) goddamn was this chapter hard. i tried my best with shouto, but idk how well I captured him. i love him sm he deserves the world.

3) bamf fuyumi is my guilty pleasure.

4) mera yokumiru is that dude who proctored the canon

provisional license exam. the one who was bored of his job, I just used him bc I didn't wanna bother with making new OCs for the HPSC.

5) more details on koharu's family. her family name on her mom's side (i.e. the fancy healer side) is hiryo, like 日 (hi) sun 療 (ryo) remedy. haruki (陽 [haru] (sun, sunlight) 生 [ki] (life)) is her younger brother. She's the middle kid. The shared haru is deliberate. Then we've got our Hiryo fam contact, Aoi (蒼 - blue). I had a long-ass fight with myself on whether to make her a dude or a girl, and I settled on girl, because I seem to have some sort of obsession with random female OCs. I'm sorry TT

6) if you're thinking the class' reaction to the whole "izuku was bullied" situation seemed too mild compared to other fics, I'm mostly going on canon. all of them have seen bakugou at his worst with deku during deku vs kacchan v1, where bakugou was acting like an utter lunatic and many of them acknowledged it. uraraka even said straight up "that's the dude who bullies you, right deku?" or something of the like. in fact, i'd argue that deku vs kacchan v1 is the worst bakugou has treated deku, worse than middle school because it got super physical. people might not agree, but based on strictly the events we've seen in canon and not assumptions, that's what I believe. i don't think they'd be particularly surprised that bakugou bullied midoriya, because, like shouto says, they have eyes. though that's all the comments I'll make on them. everyone is free to interpret and judge them as you please. i love seeing your different opinions.

7)bakugou's letter... i just had him write it like he'd speak it lol. i could've gone for like a cold, report-style situation, but ngl i thought this version would be funnier because I'm a sadist.

8) to give you a clue for what's gonna happen next, look for an easter egg tied to names in chapter ten ^^

9)hawks cameo lol. I'm slowly incorporating the HPSC. katsuki's gonna have all of japan on his ass by the end of this.

Chapter 15: Close encounters

Chapter Summary

Katsuki is messy.

(warnings for: sorta graphic descriptions of what happened to katsuki from his own potty mouth, a panic attack, more kidnapping)

Chapter Notes

I have returned.

Whoow im nervous again, boyyy.

it's barely been six days since last chapter, ik, but I couldn't exist.

remember that the shop has been moved from nara to tokyo again after koharu returned from her conference.

reminder again for everyone that updates are hopefully on Saturdays. though subscribing to the story is your best bet for staying up to date.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He dyes his hair.

Hot pink isn't a color one would associate with him, but then again, that is kind of the point, isn't it? Watching the washable spray go on easily, he's grateful for both his blond natural hair and his modest hairdressing abilities (from when the hag would bring him along to shoots, inevitably get too busy to hang out, and the stylists would cart him away, cooing "Bakugou-san's cute son, he looks just like her!" and promising to teach him hair and makeup to kill time). The dye smells of fake strawberries, sweet and artificial.

His hair isn't the exact same color, but the spiky texture is distinct, and he'd rather not let any customer get a proper read on his natural features. So Katsuki dyes his hair a different color every week.

"Your hair," Koharu calls from the hallway, stopping on her way to the kitchen. He's only got half his head covered. He looks a little like a clown.

“Mhm?” Katsuki says in reply, the sound muffled by the comb between his teeth.

“It’s lighter.” He can almost hear her frown.

It is? He puts down both comb and spray, flexing his aching wrist, leaning over the sink to get a good look at himself in the mirror. His face has filled in from the sunken state he arrived here in, and his cheeks have a healthy flush to them, a borderline sunburn. Katsuki’s pale so his skin has always been sensitive to the sun —he even got the one-off freckle in the summer— but this is the first time a sunburn has persisted into winter. *Have I spent too much time hanging clothes outside?*

She says his hair is lighter, but to Katsuki, his eyes offer the most obvious difference. They’re pale and milky, so different from the crimson he used to share with his mother. If he’s honest, sometimes he has a hard time making out signs on the street or labels on shelves that are too small or too far away. *Are the old man’s genes kicking in?*

“I guess.” He grabs the spray again and gets to work on the rest of his head. “I don’t really give a shit.”

“Of course you don’t…” She’s speaking to herself yet he still feels scolded. “Remind me to give you a full checkup tomorrow. It’s been too long since your last one.”

“Hah? What for? M’fine.”

“I’ll be the judge of that—” She starts coughing, hard. Healer hag’s old so the occasional cough is expected, but they’ve been sounding a little wet lately.

“Ya sure it ain’t you who needs that checkup?” By the time he’s sprayed his whole head, washed away the excess dye, and stowed away the supplies in the second drawer (his drawer), she still hasn’t stopped coughing.

“I’m okay,” she says when she’s done. The three straight minutes of coughs didn’t do her any favors on the reliability scale.

“Sit the hell down. I’m making you tea before you kneel over or something. We can afford to open ten minutes late.” He closes the drawer and makes a beeline for the kitchen.

“You’re always on my case about taking care of myself but you don’t

do fuck all for *yourself*. Don't you think that's bullshit?"

She huffs from where she's sitting on the table. "I take care of myself fine."

"Yeah, and I'm legally alive." As he's putting the kettle on the stovetop, Satsu creeps into the room like a criminal and prances across the counter to sit and stare at Katsuki. "Oi, jump down from there. I can't see shit because of your damn clouds."

His aura obscures the buttons on the stove and Katsuki is forced to wing it, because instead of moving like a good boy would, Satsu hisses and looks at Katsuki like Katsuki is a stranger who stole his food and wrecked his favorite cardboard box.

"What, don't recognize me?"

Satsu meows and leaps onto his shirt, gripping it tight with one paw and scratching at his hair with the other. "Motherfucker! It's me stupid dumbass. Stop— Stop that!"

Healer hag has the audacity to laugh like this isn't the third week now that she's seen Satsu do this. Something about Katsuki with different hair makes Satsu think he's a whole different person.

"Look, you heathen." He uses his hands to flatten down his hair and Satsu's little eyes go comically wide as he makes a meow of recognition. He stops his harassment, jumping down to instead start rubbing himself on Katsuki's legs. "Oh, now you like me? Fuck you. You're lucky you're cute."

Once the kettle starts whistling he takes it off the heat and puts it on the table, grabbing two mugs and some ingredients from the cupboards. This special mix of honey and ginger is damn good for colds and coughs.

"Thank you," says Healer hag after taking the first sip, "It's good."

Of course, it is. He's number one at tea making. He takes a sip of his own and lets the warmth spread through him, eyes coming to a close. Satsu is being clingy (Katsuki has come to understand this is his form of apology), heavy and comforting on his lap.

When he opens his eyes he finds healer hag looking at him with this weird look, corners of her mouth quirked up.

“What?!” he asks, suddenly self-conscious.

“Nothing.” She takes another sip. “Thinking about how you’ve been getting bossy.”

Katsuki can feel the heat gathering on the tips of his ears. Shit. Did he fuck up? Who the hell does he think he is—?

“I—”

She doesn’t let him finish. “It’s not a bad thing. It means you’re getting comfortable.”

His ears are burning because she’s right, she’s so fucking right she’s got no idea.

“I’m happy. I was never around much for my younger family members growing up but I’m starting to regret it —if they’d been anything like you.”

He almost chokes on thin air. She wants Katsuki to die of embarrassment is that right? Sappy people are a whole different breed because who the hell just up and says shit like that? A dozen self-deprecating thoughts are at the tip of his tongue but he swallows them all for fear of appearing an attention-seeking loser and says: “I’m a hundred times better than they could ever be.” you know, like a liar.

Healer hag laughs and downs the rest of her tea in one gulp. “How are things going with the journal?”

“The quirk aura one?”

“Yeah.”

“Decent,” he says, because it’s the lukewarm truth.

Based on patient observation and a few low-risk tests with Satsu, these are the conclusions he’s got so far:

1. He sees quirk energy around people because some part of him (his soul?) is stuck in a plane of existence where that’s visible.
2. Quirk energy is what keeps quirks going and lets them defy natural laws.
3. The more quirk energy the stronger the quirk. People below a certain threshold don’t have enough quirk energy so their auras are blank and they’re quirkless, people above the threshold have

energy with an appearance matching their quirk.
4. He hasn't figured out a real way to guess how much quirk energy someone has by sight alone, but typically, the bigger or brighter or more tangible the aura the stronger the quirk.
5. Based on type: mutant auras stay close to the skin, emitter auras are the biggest and concentrate around areas of emission, while transformation type auras are something in between, they spread further from the skin compared to mutant types and, when the quirk is in use, concentrate around transformed areas. These conclusions are all mostly preliminary, because he doesn't have a close human subject to test things with apart from Koharu, and her quirk is a mess.
6. Objects produced by a quirk also have a small amount of quirk energy.
7. He can touch auras if he concentrates enough, but touching them always burns. It doesn't leave any evidence on his actual skin, but it feels like being burned.
8. All five clients whose quirks he's touched described the feeling as "a little uncomfortable" and "I feel like you're touching me but I can't understand what part of me you're touching or how you're doing it."
9. Quirk energy doesn't like being disturbed and any sudden movements that cause displacement of it make quirks go haywire or force them to over-activate.
10. He himself emits no visible quirk energy, but the side effects of his quirk are still there and whenever he gets an injury he can see that his blood glows an abnormal orange-red, whatever that means.

It's not half bad, but it's nothing super solid either.

"I need more opportunities to work with auras directly," Katsuki confesses, sitting up to put the mugs into the sink.

Koharu hums. "There are a few interns from a hero agency who made an appointment coming in his afternoon. To see you, specifically. Quirk troubles they said. You can get some practice."

That's good to hear, but the mere mention of hero agencies has his skin crawling. Why does he have the shittiest feeling?

"Good afternoon!"

His intuition was right because why, why in the everloving mother of

goddamn fucks, did this intern, of all hundreds of thousands of interns across Japan, have to be fucking shitty hair? Katsuki's always wanted to be the best at everything, that's true, but being number one in the game of horrible, pissy luck is getting really fucking tiring.

Shitty hair's shitty hair is as shitty as ever, and his winter costume is just his regular costume with sleeves as if those two sad tubes of fabric will make up for the fact that his entire chest is exposed to the freezing winter weather. Fucking hell. Suddenly he's having flashbacks to invisible girl struggling to do two pull-ups in a row and dunce face sticking his fingers into sockets on the regular and wondering how these impractical idiots are meant to survive daily life never mind be the top crop of the country's future heroes.

He's neutral towards his mask on good days and wants to fling it into the ocean on bad ones, but today he presses it so tight against his face it may end up leaving an indent. Thank god he decided to dye his hair, thank fucking god.

"G-good— a—" Whoever Kirishima's friend is he gives up on the greeting halfway through, turning instead to face the wall and mumbling something like "Remember the potatoes!" under his shaking breath. Every other person is beginning to look to Katsuki like a Deku reject and he's starting to think this may be his personal version of hell.

"We're the ones who made the appointment yesterday— from Fatgum's agency. I'm Red Riot and this is Suneater!" Oh god, it's really shitty hair, and apart from being a little more serious, he hasn't changed one bit.

He'll be able to tell. My voice will give me away. What the fuck do I do? What the fuck do I do—?!

"Welcome, you're right on time." Healer hag's voice reaches Katsuki's ears muffled. "Could you describe your problem?"

He'll find out.

"My senpai here was hit by a quirk erasing bullet. They're a thing that's recently popped up. Another person from an agency close to ours was also hit, but their quirk returned overnight. It's been two days and there's been nothing. We were hoping you could have a look at it."

Katsuki's feet feel like they're glued to the floor. *It's over. It's done.*

They'll make me go back. He'll find out. Fuck. Fuck. Fucking—

"—ssistant?" He's getting tunnel vision and not only due to the mask. Before he knows it he's being dragged away, some vague excuses of bringing over the medical table ringing in his ears.

"Katsuki?" The mask is torn away and he feels himself flinch. He's heaving, he realizes, air barely making it into his lungs. "Breathe with me, okay?"

He tries, he tries so fucking hard, and it takes forever to get himself under control, to stop himself from shaking. His wrist hurts, his arms hurt. *What's wrong with me?*

"What's wrong?" Koharu echoes once he's calm enough to have a proper bearing of his surroundings. He notes she's closed the sliding door. At the very least those two on the other side didn't see him freaking out.

"Those two in there— one of them's from UA. From my class. The one with the sh—red hair. We… uh… we used to be friends." The word is foreign on his tongue, but that's what they were, weren't they?

Koharu frowns. "I could call the appointment off—"

"No!" he manages to keep his voice to whisper level. "I'm fine it's just… we'll get busted…"

"Is that what you're worried about?"

He nods and earns himself a light tap with the cane. "Don't worry about that. He won't find out."

"You don't fucking know—"

"He's got no idea where to expect you, right? You were announced dead." Except he went and told Deku and Icy Hot and Kirishima too that he isn't because he's a fucking moron, but she's not aware of that little fact. "I can call off the appointment if you believe it's too risky, but I think you'll be alright."

It'll be weirder if I freak out and don't help him. If I do help him and it goes well he won't suspect this place at all. It'll be crossed off the list. I need to do this to learn more about quirks. I should—

"But my voice."

“You don’t have to speak,” she tells him, and it’s such an obvious answer. “Either that or try your best to change your speech pattern. Use keigo*.” He wrinkles his nose. “Or do you not know how to do that?”

The tone is teasing but it makes Katsuki want to use the best fucking formal language in the whole fucking country out of spite. He’ll start speaking more politely than goddamn ponytail.

“You think you can do it?”

“I—Yeah.”

“If you get overwhelmed at any time give me a signal and I’ll get them to leave, alright?”

She’s babying him (and seems entirely unperturbed at the prospect of getting tacked with kidnapping charges if they *do* get busted) and he’s feeling panicked enough that he can’t even bring himself to mind. The only thing he says is: “Okay.”

When they return to the main shop room, mask back on, the rolling medical table in toe, they find Deku-reject staring intently at the floor and Shitty hair exploring the rows and rows of medicines like a kid in a candy store. Katsuki takes a deep breath to steady himself and looks at their auras while letting Koharu do the talking.

Kirishima’s is a jagged, lava-like liquid that Katsuki imagines goes hard whenever he hardens, while Deku reject’s is what can only be described as a mess of textures (though the vibe is completely different from All For One’s aura). What strikes him right away is that this aura isn’t attached to Suneater’s skin. It’s floating about four centimeters above it, almost split from his body by a transparent, plastic bag-like barrier. Huh.

“If Suneater-san could please sit down,” she instructs and Deku-reject seems eager to comply. He’s kind of shaking, and Katsuki is almost comforted by the fact that he’s not the only loser freaking out in this room.

“Could you repeat your problem?” Katsuki finds it in himself to ask, leveling the gravel in his voice and using the politest form of speech he can get out of his mouth without combusting. Kirishima’s eyes widen a millimeter and he can feel the weight of his gaze, but he doesn’t start announcing he’s found Katsuki while jumping to handcuff Koharu like in the made-up scenario in Katsuki’s head, so it could be

worse.

Act like you've got no idea who Bakugou Katsuki or Kirishima Eijirou are. Act like you have no idea what UA is. C'mon. C'mon.

"My… um… m—my quirk s—stopped working." Ah, so Deku-reject *can* speak properly. Katsuki focuses on him to avoid doing anything stupid with Kirishima. Is Suneater worried his quirk is gone for good? Because the quirk energy is definitely still there.

"Okay… I am going to try something. Please do not panic," he grinds out, the formal tone unfamiliar in his throat. He's had a bit more practice, so it takes only a minute of awkward air groping to make contact with the aura. The barrier around it really does feel like a plastic bag. The burn is worse than usual. He holds back a hiss.

Suneater jerks where he's sitting, staring down at the spot where Katsuki's hand is touching his quirk. "I f-felt that," he says, not making eye contact.

Katsuki doesn't bother to reply, too focused on poking at the strange film. Kirishima picks up his slack. "Woah, so you really can touch quirks?"

He gives a faint nod, feeling sweat run down his arms inside his shirt. "A cousin of Fatgum's recommended this place. Apparently, he got his gum quirk fixed here." *Fuck you Gumball Machine*. "I didn't think it was real… Is it your own quirk?"

Katsuki's overwhelmed, by the burn of the aura and Kirishima's voice and presence that he totally definitely one hundred percent has not missed not in the slightest fucking nope who's he kidding he's halfway between punting Kirishima out of here and never letting him go again.

"That's a trade secret," Koharu saves him by answering from where she's observing behind the counter.

"Can my quirk c-come back?" Suneater cuts in. He's definitely worried about getting stuck quirkless. Who wouldn't be?

No shit it can you half bit nitwit. "It can—" *If you shut your stupid trap and let me fucking work.* "—If you would allow a little time for me to work. I—" *Hate your guts and wish you and UA would choke for shaving five years off my lifespan due to shear stress.* "—apologize for any discomfort. Let me know if it hurts."

His head is meaner than usual. Suneater literally just breathed. Is it the nerves? It must be the nerves.

Get yourself together dumbass. His quirk might not be gone yet but if you fuck it up what are you gonna do then?

Tuning everything else out, he zeroes in on the aura. At first, he tries to bridge the gap from skin to aura like he did with Gumball Machine way back, but the film prevents it from sticking. It's almost bouncy.

I need to get rid of the film. That has to be what's causing the problem.

"What is your quirk?" Katsuki asks.

"It… um… it's called manifest… and it lets me manifest anything I eat on my body. For example… if I eat takoyaki, I can manifest octopus tentacles." That's not bad.

"What have you eaten today?"

"Only m-miso soup for breakfast," Suneater admits, fidgeting. "I was s-scared of what could happen."

Well, at least he doesn't need to worry about getting kicked in the face by stray cow hooves or some shit. S*mall blessings. Focus on the small blessings.*

Katsuki makes a noise low in his throat and pokes at the aura again. If he thinks of it as a plastic bag full of liquid or air… all he needs to do is pop it, no? So, using his nails, he pushes into the film. It's elastic and kind of tough but Suneater isn't yet complaining about any pain, so Katsuki keeps pressing and pressing until he hears the film rip alongside actually seeing it.

It's his first time hearing auras make noise, and it's his first time having them smell like something too, in this case, an overpowering aroma of miso paste. Suneater gasps, but it's not a pained sound. His aura starts leaking out of the tear in the film and sticking itself back to his skin, but part of the film is still there.

Something tells Katsuki that if he wants to get the quirk back for good, he's gonna have to get rid of the barrier entirely. Now that it's popped he can peel it away like a wrapping. It burns real bad and the smell of miso and dashi, usually pleasant, is nauseating. The parts of his vision not clouded by aura seem to darken and blur by a smidge. The film is thin and flimsy now that it's popped, so it sticks and tears

several times. It's a goddamn pain in the ass, and Katsuki has to stop himself, tear his hand away from the aura, and take breaks every sixty seconds because, otherwise, he feels like his fingers will fall off.

It takes thirty-five minutes to get the whole thing. A job has never taken this long. The most was five. But damn is it satisfying, when he gets to the home stretch and peels the final bit away, gathering the plastic film in his hands. He wonders what would happen if he left it somewhere, but he doesn't have to wonder long, because it begins to disintegrate the moment it's completely detached from the aura and ten seconds later it's nothing but invisible dust in the wind.

Wow. It must be some damn strong drugs that can do this sort of thing.

He feels the damp sweat that's gathered on his brow under the mask and his fingers prickle. Once he stops touching the aura, he can't hear or smell it anymore either, he notes.

"Attempt to use your quirk." He sounds so awkward dear god.

Suneater complies, standing up, crumpling his face, and looking marginally less constipated when a fish fin manifests on his forearm.

"My m-mom uses bonito flakes for the dashi," he says, as if Katsuki gives a shit.

Katsuki just nods, smiling to himself beneath the mask at the successful job. Before he knows it he's got Kirishima's hand at his back, and it takes more than he'd like to admit to suppress a flinch.

"That's amazing! You fixed it for real! I was worried his quirk would be gone for good." Kirishima is way too close and Katsuki turns to Suneater of all people for help only to find that he's snaked away to talk to Koharu at the counter and he assumes, pay for the service. So now Katsuki is stuck with Kirishima. Great. Fucking great.

He grunts in acknowledgment and slips out of his friend's (ex-friend? classmate? ex-classmate?) grip. Kirishima has been watching him like a hawk this whole time. *I really have to hammer it in I'm not Bakugou Katsuki now if he suspects.*

"I would prefer if you refrained from touching me." He cringes inwardly. Kirishima immediately pulls away, the considerate bastard.

"Sorry, man… your voice is just kind of familiar." If Katsuki were any less a man he'd have pissed his pants a little, right there.

“We have never met.”

“Yeah, I know.” Kirishima bites his lip. “I guess I really miss this friend.” He laughs, though there’s something somber to it. *Now, why’d you have to go and say that you asshole? I’m trying my best to stay incognito here.* “What’s your name?”

Katsuki panics. “Huh?”

“It’s ‘Huh’? Your name?”

“No. It’s um… uh… Assistant!” *Fuck me backward. I’m supposed to be smart.*

“Isn’t that you?”

“What?”

“I know you’re the assistant. I was asking your name.”

“That’s my name.”

“What, ‘assistant’?”

“Yeah.”

Kirishima laughs like Katsuki has delivered an award-winning punchline and Katsuki wants to dig himself a hole and die in it.

“You’re funny.” He scrunches his nose. “But man, your voice is *so* similar to my friend’s.” *Let that go. Let that go*. “Though you’re very different.” *Is that an insult or a compliment?* “He was more like… ‘DIE!’” It’s the same imitation he made at USJ when their friendship (?) kicked off. Kirishima looks like a fond kicked puppy.

“Was?” *What am I doing? Why did I ask that?*

“Yeah he… um… he went through some hard stuff. I haven’t seen him in a long time,” Kirishima breathes. It had been hard, hadn’t it? So fucking hard, even though he hated admitting it. “I wish I could’ve done more to help him.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t blame you.” It slips out before he can stop it.

“Maybe… but I was still a pretty bad friend.”

“That’s fucking bullshit,” he mutters, forgetting to catch himself.

Kirshima's eyes widen as they look at him. Oh, now he's done it. At a loss for what else to do, Katsuki quickly switches back to his earlier respectful speech. "That is what I imagine this friend of yours would say based on your description."

"That was— really accurate… I can't believe you got him down so easily."

"I am… very perceptive."

Kirishima laughs again. Katsuki's embarrassing himself thick today, huh? Then again, who just up and talks about their friend (??) who disappeared with a stranger they met half an hour ago? It's not his fault Kirishima wears his heart on his sleeve.

"Thanks for cheering me up bro. And for helping senpai. You've done us a huge favor."

"It is nothing," Katsuki says, "You are paying for our services."

"Still, thank you. I was worried about senpai's quirk. I think we've stumbled into something real dangerous." Katsuki feels a shiver spread from his fingers. Is it colder than usual today?

Behind them, Katsuki can hear shuffling and thank yous. Looks like Suneater is at last done paying. After fifty damn years.

"It smells like the sea in here," Kirishima says offhand, completely ignorant to the fact that they are indeed right next to the sea, and not at all in the abandoned Tokyo suburb they entered from. "It's nice."

Instead of leaving like a normal person would Kirishima stands there in front of the tiny doors and keeps his eyes firmly on Katsuki, taking in his every movement, squinting again. Katsuki tries to make himself look busy by cleaning up the medical table, and makes his movements more clumsy than usual to throw Kirishima off the trail more.

For a moment, he thinks he's been busted, but soon Suneater is tugging at Kirishima's useless sleeves and they're both uttering goodbye.

"Take care," Katsuki calls. It's the standard parting greeting for any hospital or clinic, but he feels that now more than ever, they're going to need it. He's not sure why.

Aoyama was the first strike.

He'd come to the teacher's lounge one morning looking a bit disheveled and worried, asking to see Shouta, so Shouta had sat him down and coaxed him to explain his problem.

"I've been worried about Monsieur Midoriya."

You and everyone. Shouta had resisted the urge to sigh as he surveyed his student fidgeting on the couch. *When will these kids get a day of peace?* "How so?" he prompted, urging Aoyama to continue.

"Monsieur Midoriya's room is next door to mine. He often sleeps late, studying. C'est normal. But yesterday he turned off his lights early, before moi at least. I thought he had gone to bed. That's why it was worrying when I woke up to sounds like talking and scuffling coming from his room at around three am."

Well… that could be bad. Midoriya hasn't been handling the Bakugou situation well, they all knew that, but talking in the middle of the night?

"Naturellement, I feared he could be in trouble, so I knocked on his door. He answered and he looked very awake, swore he was alright and had only gotten carried away with studying and muttering. He opened the door in a way that didn't let me see inside his room, but he appeared très bien so I went back to bed. However, I felt it incorrect not to let you know."

Shouta frowned and when he'd observed Midoriya that day in homeroom, the problem child seemed to be positively glowing. It was like half of some insurmountable weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Needless to say, Shouta was confused.

Now, eleven days later, he knows exactly what's going on and it feels like a pipedream.

He'd been expecting the worst when Tsukauchi called him. Some sort of bad news. Some sort of new nail in the coffin. Not "Bakugou showed up to Midoriya's room in the middle of the night and left him a report of what happened with the LOV and a promise that he's okay." no way in hell.

And yet. Here he is with a copy of said report in hand. He cried and he's not ashamed to admit it. Sushi had been looking at him weirdly all afternoon as he refused to let the piece of paper proving that a kid

he'd failed wasn't a rotting corpse in a ditch go. Sue him, he was happy, so happy that Bakugou had decided to do this for them, to relieve some of their worries, wherever he was.

Then he reads the report and has his heart broken all over again.

Because it's disturbing and terrifying, not only how nonchalantly Bakugou recounts gruesome details, but what his words imply. It's got everything. Detailed profiles on the villains, short recollections of every visit from "the doctor", fast facts from the things they'd spilled to him, and Bakugou's own assumptions.

- *Blond deranged schoolgirl bitch is called Toga Himiko, has some blood-related quirk, is obsessed with blood. Seems like a teenager. Doesn't give a fuck about ideologies but does care about some other villains.*
- *Twice is the guy who wears full-body spandex. Has split personality. First name Jin (?). Didn't bother trying to recruit me after I blew him up the first time.*
- *Muscular looks too much like me and broke my leg like a twig. I hate him.*
- *Warp fucker is team mom and team dishwasher. Shigaraki whines to him like Shigaraki is his toddler.*

He writes about them like they're video game characters, even providing arbitrary "stats".

***Shigaraki**:*

- *Annoying: 10/10 (special ability monologues)*
- *Danger level: 10/10 (zero muscle and not strong physically but so unstable he might decide to decay one's face off at random)*
- *Extenuating circumstances: 20/10*
- *Loyalty to AFO: 10/10 (acts like AFO is his dad)*
- *Loyalty from the League: 5/10*

Shigaraki is All For One's heir. Might be his kid, might be a random kid he found in a gutter. Doctor said Shigaraki decayed his whole family when he was a brat and the hands he carts around are theirs. All For One makes him do it. He's kind of like a brainwashed game-obsessed five-year-old. Has no idea how Nomus are made but is set to get body modifications at some point. Wanted to recruit me real bad. Doctor and half the league doesn't think he's got what it takes. All Might hate boner.

This is fucked up. Bakugou's delivery is truly softening the blow, but when you stop to contemplate the content, fucked up is the only way you can describe it.

Dabi is annoying. Has some sort of history/beef with the Doc and AFO. Helped burn my arms to test their fire resistance. Starts smoking at the seams from quirk overuse. Was jealous because I'm more fire-resistant than him. Huge Endeavor hate boner.

And so on. But those aren't the worst parts of the report, not by far. The worst are the recounts of the actual… torture sessions. They're often written in the third person, and give some important insight into Bakugou's mental state, and it's … off to say the least. Shouta had gone and highlighted some of the most damning passages.

- *Session 3:*

Doc's strategy is telling subject over and over that they are meant to be a villain as if this will convince them by magic. He is horrible at it.

- *Session 4:*

Flames will only burn me if they're over 3300 degrees so that's around Dabi's upper limit.

- *Session 5:*

Hot pokers. Doc does in-depth studies of every subject. Knows way too much about me and Deku's early childhood. Used to be our neighborhood quirk doctor. Called me delusional. Is obsessed with both All For One and Deku. Seems to think strong quirks are sexy, especially those like mine, that come with a heap of built-in body modifications.

- *Session 8:*

Be careful of Doc noticing subjects from Sports Festival. Hands noticed me because of the ceremony. They're both stupid so they don't understand that it was a power dynamics and marketing thing, and that chaining me up was the right call that would obviously make UA the most money, but

because they're stupid and can't comprehend that they might pull shit like this again so be extra careful with future sports festivals.

Shouta winces.

The sports festival is a particularly sore spot, because while what happened to Bakugou *was* out of line, the kid is right on when he says it was done for the ratings. Shouta'd assumed Bakugou was fine because he didn't care about what happened, not that he had no idea it was wrong in the first place.

- *Session 12:*

Doc needed skin samples. He tells subject over and over that they speak like a villain and this is their karma as a form of brainwashing (unsure). If told to make observations that aren't obvious for once, Doc will get mad and start stabbing. If told subject will feed him his own entrails in the future Doc will get madder and deny the subject water.

- *Session 13:*

Doc doesn't heal Nomu test subjects. He uses anti-infection and anti-inflammation quirks to keep them alive. Super annoying.

- *Session 18:*

AFO showed up. He's the most annoying. Monologued a lot. Is tall, smells like a rich sewer, and has a million quirks. Will attempt to do something to subject with his creepy ass quirk, get mad when it doesn't work, then stab subject in an effort to kill (?) them. Talked about loving "stories". Is probably a sadist. Has mustache-twirling four-dimensional chess-playing vibes. Kill him while he's in jail for peace of mind.

And it's fucked. It's fucked so bad. Because Bakugou seems to call horrible things "obvious" and downplay painful to "annoying", then in several instances it reads like he thinks all these things that happened to him were justified and deserved. And at the same time, in some sickening sense, the entire text is so very *Bakugou* the implications

make him ill.

When Shouta gets to the detailed section on “Nomu-making” that’s again written like they’re referring to a third party but is obviously about things that have happened to Bakugou, a sixteen-year-old kid, Shouta has to take a break when he gets to the no food or water or outside world contact bit, and that’s only five sentences in.

It’s even worse than he’s imagined, and Shouta has got no idea, not even a lick of an idea, as to how Bakugou stayed alive throughout all of this.

There are these little sentences spread about. Little moments of vulnerability.

Not allowed to take showers or wash hands or use water as anything but drink. Makes subject feel useless and dirty.

The process is counterproductive because it just makes subject want to die.

Porridge is only food and the requirement is that it must taste like nothing.

LSD is not good for subject’s brain so doc loves it.

Paralytic strength is different every time depending on if Doc wants to hear subject scream or not.

Has paralytic strong enough to stop lungs from working.

Bakugou admits that he was only half lucid and sober throughout the entire thing so the diary part of the report might be inaccurate (especially in regards to dates and times) and TMI. In some of the more unsavory descriptions, the strokes of the kanji seem to falter, like he had a hard time writing it out.

How bad did Shouta mess up, that he left a kid exposed to *this*?

He still doesn’t regret expelling Bakugou, but looking back on it, he’s not sure if he should’ve instead gone for a suspension or his typical expel-and-re-enroll strategy. Did he jump the gun too fast? And even disregarding that, their real mistake was not looking into Bakugou’s home life at all, and leaving him exposed as food for picking. The villains had admitted themselves that they’d noticed Bakugou from the Sports Festival ceremony, which was a mishap on UA’s part. They should’ve made sure to put protective measures in place even after expelling him. It was a basic responsibility.

And it's true that Shouta thought Bakugou had a lot, a lot about himself to change and improve, but he wasn't a villain.

He sighs and puts down the paper, can't seem to shake the thought that he's missing things, that he isn't being told the full truth. He wonders why Tsukauchi only gave him a copy of the letter, or why Aoyama had cited Midoriya as being awake on the night the letter was supposedly delivered while Midoriya claims the opposite.

Some things didn't add up. There are odd gaps in the text, and far too many mentions of Deku. And there's no explanation of where Bakugou is now, if and how he recovered, how he survived getting stabbed by All For One and left the lab at all…

And besides, how did Bakugou get through UA security in the first place?

I should look through the camera footage.

His phone pings on the table. Sushi lets out a meow.

[Bubble Girl] 21:47

Good evening Ereaserhead-san.

[Bubble Girl] 21:47

Sorry for the short notice.

[Bubble Girl] 21:48

Sir wanted to know if you were available for a meeting tomorrow.

Great. More things to pile onto his plate.

ON THE SAME NIGHT — TOKYO

Two days since they'd arrived in Tokyo and Katsuki had narrowly dodged the shitty hair bullet, he finds himself on the same path he'd often walked a month or so ago, books heavy in his tote bag.

He *had* promised librarian nerd he'd buy her new copies of the books he wrecked, and he has money now, so he went and did it. What better time to deliver them than when they're in Tokyo for work?

So he walks the thin lit street, more secure in his own feet and

confident in his strides. His training has been going well, and he's kept his speed and acrobatics reliant fighting style and bought himself some pocket knives to make up for the lack of firepower. It's nowhere, *nowhere* near what he could do with explosion (and the feeling remains a bitter one) but at the very least he isn't completely helpless anymore. Stabbing is an equal opportunity weapon, pretty much.

But he's feeling a little uncomfy the closer he gets to the library, and maybe it's some sort of irony, but the moment he enters that same street he'd fought that duo and found out he could touch quirks, he feels as though everyone is looking at him, even if there's no one outside. Not even a stray pedestrian. It's so vacant it's suspicious.

Then he feels the familiar sensation of his mouth and eyes and nose zipping themselves closed and he knows he's fucked.

Chapter End Notes

*keigo honorific speech/polite language in japanese

1) the easter egg in chapter ten is that gumball machine shares a surname with fatgum, Toyomitsu. because they're cousins here lol and I wanted an excuse to get tamaki and kirishima in here.
2) pretty much every part of this chapter is important.
3) the overhaul arc has at last begun. eri is like two chapters away.
4) the plot with overhaul will just happen as usual, just pushed forward by a few months. ignore the fact that there are no internships in late November early December okay?
5) how was aizawa's bit? i had a hard time with katsuki's report. hope it turned out well.
6) kiri popping up is a mess for poor katsuki who now has hot pink hair because I said so. i had a lot of fun with their interactions.
7) yes, 'tis the return of flower head from chapter 11. did you think he'd go down quietly.
8) katsuki I'm sorry
9) katsuki came out so mean in his head this chapter and idek why lmaoo
10) the mess the kids made and the fact that the security footage will very much not fit deku's cover story will indeed bite deku in the ass. too bad he's gonna be busy with internships and overhaul. it's about to get so messy.
11) I'm so fucking nervous I have no idea what I'm doing lmaoooooù

12) don't pay much attention to session numbers in katsuki's report. most are bullshit because katsuki doesn't remember them correctly.

Chapter 16: Confidence of the fool

Chapter Summary

The one where I retraumatize this kid :D

(every trigger this fic has ever had so far times X2. there's kidnapping, panic attacks, flashbacks, PTSD, very graphic descriptions of violence, mentioned body horror, suicidal ideation, self-harm... yeah. it's in the style I usually write it, i.e. not really described in detail, but if the triggers squick you out, you'll want to be careful, because the subject matter is definitely disturbing)

Chapter Notes

wheeeew

this chapter is a dumpster fire just like katsuki's mental state ⊙□⊙. I'm nervous but also strangely satisfied with it idek

tbh I'm always nervous before heavy chapters because while my own experiences are obviously a basis for how I choose to write katsuki, the scale of what's happening to him here is something that I and thankfully most people in this day and age, in general, will never experience and therefore can't write a testament to. I'm by no means claiming to be an expert on trauma responses or psychological issues. in fact, many of the situations I put katsuki in are often exaggerated. this isn't a medical text or a guidebook. so always keep that in mind. I do try my best to be restrained about it because I feel that heavy topics need to be handled with a certain degree of care. but this is very much a crack-treated-seriously fic with some frankly fucked up dark humor sprinkled throughout. By no means 100% accurate. it's a work of fiction.

for reference, caw-caw man, bird mask, and purple collars are katsuki's nicknames for overhaul, assistant one is Chronostatis, and assistant two/goon/bootlicker is shin nemoto

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Sit still,” says Flower Head, fixing the tape around Katsuki’s wrists. He’s breathing hard. He doesn’t know how long it’s been since the villain used his quirk in the alley to knock him out. “You don’t want me to make your nose shut itself again, do you?” Katsuki’s body

betrays him and tightens. Flower Head, the bitch, notices. “So you don’t like not being able to breathe, huh? Sucks for you.”

There’s this smirk on his face. This small, smug thing, upturned at the corners, tugging at his sallow skin. Katsuki wants to punt him into the moon.

How did this happen *again*? How did he get himself stuck in a kidnapper’s car *again*? Will librarian nerd ever get her books back? Will she ever? Katsuki is tired. He doesn’t want to do this anymore. He doesn’t want to do anything anymore. He wants to go home and wrap himself in his futon and sleep for fifty years straight.

Is it his luck that’s bad, or is he this weak, that any random weirdo can steal him off the street like he’s a sack of potatoes and not a damn ex-fighter?

Okay. Relax. Getting worked up won’t help him. This is fine.

He needs to focus on getting out of here first. The self-deprecation can come later.

“You’re a pain in the ass, you know,” continues Flower Head after finishing up with the tape on his ankles and shoving him roughly in the front passenger seat. The windows of the car are tinted. The smell of worn-down leather, thick and heavy, can’t be covered by the pathetic pine tree-shaped air freshener hanging on the rearview mirror. If anything, those scents seem to mix with the layers of dust on the dashboard and gunk built up in every crevice to paint a nauseating picture of *nasty*. Katsuki chances a look at the floor mat and finds it brown and caked with dried mud of who knows how many years. Gum wrappers and crumpled plastic baggies peak from its corners.

When was this place last cleaned? Never mind the kidnapping, he’s gonna catch fucking dysentery.

He can’t even scowl, his lips are pinched closed by lines of duct tape that wrap all the way around his neck, tugging at parts of his hair. *That’s gonna hurt like a bitch to take off.* “My setup at the store was so convenient. You had to go and ruin it. I get the feeling you ruin a lot of things—” That has no right to sting. Ruining human trafficking rings is a *good* thing.

“—right, Bakugou Katsuki?” He stops breathing. Is that how it’s like? He wants out.

“Cat got your tongue? I didn’t realize it was you on that day because you were a real weakling, nothing like what I’d seen on TV. But I reviewed some footage, and it is you, isn’t it?”

Katsuki can feel his arms tremor.

“The League’s looking for you, you know.” He flinches. *What’s wrong with me? I need to get it together.* “The money I’ll get for offering you up might make up for all the damages you did to me at the store. You even stole the quirked cat —It was real hard to slip by the cops.”

His mind goes fuzzy, clouding with images of reflective walls and plastic gloves and holes in the ceiling to poorly replace stars. *I’m doing you a favor. Delusional children who deny their nature and reality are unbearable, don’t you agree? Why would they? They’ve never cared. Why would they spend precious resources on a future villain? They already see you as a villain, your school, your old teachers, the public. Everyone but you sees it. Bullying that kid, you’ve already built a ton of XP. Why do you make it harder on yourself by wanting to change skill halfway through playing?*

A slap snaps him out of his stupor. “Hey, shit, pay attention. It’s no fun when you go all blank-faced.”

Satisfied by Katsuki’s murderous glare, Flower Head falls back into his seat and revs up the car. It makes a pitiful coughing noise, exhausting useless air. Must be an old car. Katsuki’s not the most familiar with vehicle models, but comparing this one to what he remembers of his mom's car would be like comparing canvas loafers to solid iron soled boots, or maybe plain old two-ply toilet paper to those toilets that clean your ass for you *and* play a little jingle so you don’t get embarrassed when you shit.

In short, the car is trash. And its engine seems to be trash too. It takes four false starts before they’re on the move. Katsuki’s cheek stings. He squirms in his seat, cursing the seat belt buckle for digging into his stomach. The way he’s strapped down makes it near impossible to get out of his seat and pull another carjacking. *I need to get out. Out. Out Outout*

Flower Head mustn’t be happy about all his struggling, because he uses his quirk again and Katsuki’s nose shuts itself. He loses it, wishing desperately for even a single breath.

“Woah, are you crying?” Flower Head laughs and shame blooms inside Katsuki’s gut to accompany the terror. “You are! You’re crying

like a grade-schooler! What happened to your tough-guy persona, eh? I'd like to see you try that mean right hook of yours now! Who would've thought that turning you off would be as simple as pinching your nose shut—"

Black spots cloud his vision. He wants to kill Flower Head. He wants to kill himself. *What if I give in and die?* "Are you that scared of the League? Are you gonna piss yourself too? Keep this up and you might have a heart attack."

Why is he reacting like this? He was fine the first time, with that quirkless crybaby lady… Why is it different now? Why does the weight of everything feel like it's tripled? Why is his body freaking out over nothing?

The car is moving on the bumpy road. It takes forever for flower head's devil quirk to wear off so he can breathe again. His brain is telling him to get going, start fighting back, do *something*. His arms and legs are tied tight that's true but he can use some sort of sharp surface somewhere in here to pick at the tape, he can wiggle his hands out of it. He's been through so much worse.

So why can't he move? Why do his muscles feel like they're made of lead?

Why is he so weak?

Get your head out of your ass you pathetic fuck.

It's almost comical how calm the ride is. Streetlamps make room for more streetlamps, storefronts and apartments for more storefronts and apartments. The night is otherwise pitch black. For all the struggle at the start, the car can do the actual driving fine. They hit bumps and it's too loud by modern standards, but Flower Head is keeping within the speed limit like he's gone out for a joy ride and not a kidnapping. Multiple cars pass by them none the wiser and flower head is so *self-satisfied* about it.

"I've been waiting by that library for you to show up for weeks now," he monologues, "When my boss found out who'd busted my operation, he said I could get a second chance if I got my hands on you. You're prime goods kid."

Katsuki pays him and his rambling no mind, instead trying to shift his fingers to tear bits of the tape with his nails. Every time he breathes in the snot in his nose is a reminder that he had indeed been crying like

a baby mere minutes earlier. His eyes are very eager to start again with the waterworks. He keeps them at bay through sheer willpower.

“Gave up already?” laughs Flower Head, and Katsuki grits his teeth. He’ll get himself free and stab the shit out of Flower Head the moment the car stops. He can’t go back to the League. If he does, the aftermath won’t be pretty.

An hour or so later they’ve entered Tokyo’s main pier through some dodgy side entrance and he’s being dragged by the hair into an abandoned warehouse thing. Katsuki’s entire body aches from the awkward positioning he spent the drive-in, but he’s been successful in tearing a hole in the duct tape around his hands *and* he’s managed to keep a secret. For all his boasting, Flower Head is as sloppy and wishy-washy at villaining as he was the first time.

The warehouse would better be called a shipping container. It can’t be bigger than two by five. He can’t make out the color in the darkness of the night, but he can see the big five-zero-two-two stenciled on its side. The place is small and cold. Flower Head, the little bitch, stole Katsuki’s scarf, so now he’s goddamn freezing. It doesn’t help that being next to the harbor at night brings unwelcome cool continental breeze leaking through the seams of the metal. Fuck the weather.

He’s feeling better, at least. Not like the world will end with one misstep. Frankly, his first reaction in the car was terrifying. He never wants to feel that way again.

Flower Head seems to be getting a kick out of manhandling and intimidating him, because he shoves Katsuki into a corner with unnecessary force, hits him (all piling on the points next to his name on Katsuki’s “I will destroy you” list), makes a show out of flourishing the fancy gun his yet unnamed boss gave him, *then* squats a few steps away to type at his phone. Luckily, he’s as stupid as every average villain, so he hasn’t patted down Katsuki’s pockets at all, which means Katsuki’s butterfly knife is free pickings. He’s never stabbed anyone but himself before, but other people have stabbed him plenty, so he should be fine. He knows what to do.

For a while, they sit awkwardly in the shipping container, Flower Head watching his phone and turning from time to time to give Katsuki an obnoxious smirk or say some sort of bullshit, and Katsuki staring at him with an unimpressed face, cursing liberally inside his own head and picking away at the tape bit by bit, bit by bit until there

are only a few millimeters of it left. Flower head's dusty pink aura leaves a rosy cast on everything inside the container. It would be pretty were it not for the shittiness of the situation.

Now, what does he do? If he makes a run for it, he'll get shot somewhere non-lethal right away. His chances in that scenario depend on whether one) Flower Head has the balls to do it and risk making a very loud noise in what seems to be the public pier, and two) Katsuki can tank a bullet and keep running even if he gets shot like… in the leg.

Otherwise, he could attack first. Before Flower Head even has the chance to pick up his gun.

He contemplates waiting a bit more, but decides it's not worth it.

In less than a split second, he pulls his wrists apart hard to snap the last of the tape, grabs his knife from his pocket, and slices through the tape at his legs. The stuff on his face is wrapped around over three times, so he doesn't even bother, instead lunging immediately at Flower Head, who's started cursing in surprise and reaching for the gun on the floor.

Of course, Flower Head's annoying fucking quirk is all recharged again, so the small warehouse floods with pollen right away. His ears shut themselves, his eyelids are sewn closed, and there it is, he can't breathe anymore.

You're a beginner-level villain in denial.

Someone yelps. *Don't let Flower Head use his gun,* he thinks.

We'll shave away those pesky parts of his personality.

A curse bounces on the cerated metal walls of the container. Something hits the side of Katsuki's head and pain bursts there, filling his empty vision with bright splotches of color. He feels the cold barrel of the gun under his leg and kicks it away before Flower Head can get it. It impacts the wall of the container with a *clang*.

everything, tries to cough, to heave, to roll his eyes or blink, but nothing works and there are fuzzy spots in his vision and he thinks of the sludge villain and the drowning and general death.

He's stabbing blindly, and the moment his knife sinks into something warm and soft, something very different from metal or clothing, it

makes a sickening noise. Flower Head swears, though the sound is muffled by Katsuki's closed ears. He tears the knife away (there's a pained whine) and makes a stabbing motion again, the earlier loop repeating itself. Flower Head *screams* and Katsuki feels him deliver another kick, or maybe a punch to his side.

He's got no idea what he's doing, with zero senses to rely on but his stunted touch. The only things on his mind are getting Flower Head to stop moving and keeping a hold of his knife. By the fourth swing, it registers that he's committing a violent knife crime.

I don't know where I'm hitting him. I might kill this guy. Does this count as self-defense? No one's gonna buy me of all people doing shit as self-defense. What the fuck am I doing?

Katsuki is no stranger to hurting people, but he's used to being careful, calculated about it. One wrong move with Explosion could blast his opponent to nothing. Heroes aren't allowed to kill, and even "excessive" injury will look bad on your record, might earn you an unpleasant date with the court of justice. So Katsuki always had to be careful, despite his constant uttering of "Die!" which was in essence, a figure of speech. He'd go more overboard than your average hero, but it was never *too* overboard. It was never taking shot in the dark swings at someone with the only thing on his mind being survival.

"Stabbing someone to shit" as fun as it sounds, proves to feel very different in execution. Stabbing is so much more physical, so much more concrete, than taking people down with blast pressure. It's disgusting. He jerks away and drops the knife like it burned him, half expecting Flower Head to pick it up and start stabbing him as payback, but the only thing that happens is the body next to him rolling away and groaning in pain.

Panting so harsh he can hear it through his closed ears fills the small container. His ears pop soon after, followed by, thank god, his nose. He's got two of his senses back, but they only serve to make this situation that much more real.

Holy shit. I stabbed the guy twice minimum. He's going to die. I'm going to die. I'm going to prison.

"You f-fucker… those media reports were right. You're a goddamn monster—" Flower Head hisses, but he's talking, so he's not dead, and somehow that comforts Katsuki, despite the fact that he's still blind and feeling so *shit* Flower Head could do *anything* to him right now

and he'd be powerless to fight back.

can also tell, by now, who has villainous potential. You were already walking down that path. I could make you even greater.

"Take my eyes off you for two minutes and you're trying to murder me… hell, you're fucked in the head kid." More hissing. Clothes ripping. Makeshift bandages. Katsuki is stuck to the floor, paralyzed. *What's going on what am I doing what am I doing what am I doing*

"And for a second there I was feeling bad— at your crocodile tears in the car. I was worried about what the League might do to you, I read the news, I'm a human too. I almost pitied you kid. But n-no wonder the League wants you. You're a fucking freak— shit that hurts." A moment of quiet. "I heard whatever you do to quirks makes people feel like shit. Do you fucking molest people or what?"

you have to be wrong in the head since birth to end up a bully at such a young age. No Katsuki, you were never meant to be anything but a villain.

Every word brands itself on his skin and Katsuki is positive he's shaking in small, tremoring bursts.

Shut up shut up shut up shut up.

The only thing that gets past the tape is muffled grunts.

He hears shuffling, sounds coming closer, and his stomach doubles over. Then there's pressure, he's being rolled around so he's flat on his chest, and Flower Head *sits* on him. Two seconds later his own knife is at his neck. He still can't see. How long does the eye part of this quirk last?!

I'm gonna die. I deserve it. This is it. It was a shit life, he thinks.

But he doesn't die. Instead, he feels a razor-thin burn and warm blood beading on his neck.

"If you're gonna be difficult, maybe I s-should play with you a little. It'll be your fault if I never get to use the arm you've stabbed again. How do you plan to pay for t-that? You're not even my type…" he sounds disappointed and Katsuki almost ends up leaning into the knife in some misguided hope of it nicking the artery in his neck and killing him. "You really are fucked in the head. Fucking scum trash—"

Loud metal shifts. The door of the container has been opened, Katsuki

guesses.

“Filthy…” he hears a voice mutter in disgust, and the pressure on his back is relieved, Flower Head has gotten up. Visceral instincts instruct Katsuki to make himself so quiet it’ll be hard-pressed for whoever came in to even realize he’s there. “Code name Floten, yes?” The inquiry earns an over-enthusiastic agreement from Flower Head. *Floten? Sounds like a pharmaceutical company, how tacky*. “What were you doing?”

“I—uh—um.” Oh shit, Flower Head is shit scared of whoever came in. *How did this day get worse? I wanna go home. I’m fucking hungry. I want to die. I can’t die. Who will feed Satsu—?*

“Never mind. Don’t answer…That is Bakugou Katsuki, correct?”

“Yes! Exactly as we agreed!” Flower Head says with too much zeal. It’s not enough to cover his trembling voice. Katsuki wishes he could open his eyes already. He rolls over so he’s on his back. There are more shifting noises. “But be careful O-Overhaul-sama, he’s agress—”

A squelch and a pop and a hundred splats on metal.

The side of Katsuki’s face is warm, so warm. It’s dripping in something warm that keeps raining down. He brings a hand to his face and feels his fingers stick to his wet cheek. He knows this smell. It’s blood.

His eyes at last snap open and he’s met with the red-painted container. He turns his head around and there’s a pair of legs on the ground. That’s it. Just legs. They’re Flower Head’s legs. Where the hell is Flower Head’s torso and head and arms and what in the everloving god—

“No one touches me—” The sound of scratches. The man speaking wears a goofy-ass bird mask and he’s got a feathery purple collar. He looks stupid but there’s a ninety-nine percent chance he’s the guy who disintegrated Flower Head’s entire upper half. Okay. Okay. This is fine…

This is not fine.

“Kurono… take the thing and let’s get moving.”

It appears the thing means Katsuki. He lets himself get dragged.

He never should’ve bothered with those books.

What is it with him and basements? What is it with him and being strapped to chairs?

Caw-caw man's dick-sucking assistant had the decency to carry Katsuki bridal style to a small control room by the entrance of the pier instead of dragging him there by the hair like Flower Head who's dead what the fuck. Whatever assistant's quirk is it made it almost impossible for Katsuki to move fast, so he had no choice but to give in and come quietly.

It seems bird mask man can explode people from inside out, and Katsuki was too tired to fight against *that*. At that moment, that is.

In some sick way, he's relieved he's not been sent straight to the League. Unless bird mask is a new recruit, but for the sake of his sanity, Katsuki will pretend such a thing is impossible.

So he let himself get strung along, and there was a secret passage in the control room. Three sets of stairs and two long hallways later, he's in a creepy dentist office-esque area, tied to a creepy dentist chair. He wants the fish guy from the store and crybaby kidnapper back. He's been spoiled by incompetent villains.

But whatever. Whining won't do him any good.

He waited in this weird-ass room alone for two hours, and now purple collar is back with assistant #2 in toe. He's feeling… calm. Better than before. Much better. His head still hurts, he might have a concussion, but he's thinking clearly. He'll get out of here. Whoever these people are, they can't be worse than All For One.

The new assistant tears the tape from Katsuki's mouth. He clicks his jaw.

Purple collar's aura is an ugly mud brown with an unidentifiable consistency, while his new assistant's is a clear blue, water-like. Not much to go off. But the mud aura is big and very *present*. Whatever that guy's quirk is, it's strong. It has to be, considering he got rid of flower head like *that*.

"Well, then, let's start with the introductions." Caw-caw man speaks like an intellectual chain smoker. Katsuki wrinkles his nose. He signals his goon.

"What's your name?" the goon asks Katsuki and the blue aura around

him solidifies at the words, turning the consistency of jelly, suffocating the room. The words slip from Katsuki's tongue without him meaning them too. "Katsuki."

"You were a UA student?"

"Yes."

"You were expelled for bullying a peer?"

"Yes."

"You spent anywhere from two weeks to a month under League captivity?"

"Yes."

The answers pour out of him, each question accompanied by a thickening of the air. *It's this guy's quirk*, he realizes. *He has a truth quirk.* Katsuki narrows his eyes.

"You escaped the League?"

"No shit," he says, testing the limits of the power, earning two unhappy glares from his captors. Truth quirks are annoying, that much is true, but they have an obvious weakness. As long as you say *some* form of truth, you'll be fine. It's only the extreme ones that can direct specific questions and demand specific answers. And assistant #2's isn't that type. In fact, Katsuki bets he could even dispel the aura outright and get it to stop working. But for now, he'll stick to the simple loophole, tell the bare minimum truths that will piss them off the most.

"How did you escape the League?"

"I walked."

"How did you survive your last encounter with All For One?"

"Dunno." It's the truth. He should probably be dead. The two assholes look at each other again, and Katsuki takes advantage of the opening. "You gonna tell me who you are? It's real rude to grab people off the streets and demand they answer your bullshit. If you wanna get to know me get in line with all the other peasants."

"You're calm."

“Ain’t my first rodeo.”

“You weren’t calm in the container.”

“Technical difficulties.”

“Why are you so important to the League?” It’s purple collar who asks, seeming nonplussed by Katsuki’s attitude. A thinks-they’re-a-mastermind type then. He’s so fucking annoying already. But all these League questions seem to imply these two *aren’t* with the League, which, coupled with the fact that all they’ve done so far is ask questions, is helping a lot with keeping calm. He feels fine. He’ll pull through. Even though this setup screams incoming torture.

“They think I’m sexy.” *And good villain material.*

Assistant #2 sighs. “So you’re going to be difficult.”

Katsuki sighs back. “Got no reason not to be. You dragged me around, my head hurts, I’m hungry, I have no idea who you are. I wish you’d choke and die, to be honest.”

And he knows from experience they won’t stop hurting him no matter what they promise or what he says, so it’s not worth it giving them an easy time.

Caw-caw man tugs at his gloves and for some reason, the action makes Katsuki’s hair stand on end. He comes closer and, after smoothing the left glove, begins tapping at the clothes-covered skin on Katsuki’s shin. Katsuki resists the urge to flinch. Damn, they’re moving fast. *Now* he’s feeling the panic.

Purple collar keeps tapping in a rhythmic pattern. “You went silent. Looks like you do have some self-preservation.” He doesn’t answer. “You’re right, however. We haven’t been the most polite. There’s no reason to be polite with filth, but I’ll indulge you… I go by Overhaul, and I run the Shie Hassaikai.”

Katsuki blinks, pretends to think. “Never heard of ya.”

Assistant #2, like a good, proper boot licker, gets mad on his boss’ behalf. “How dare you s—”

“It’s alright Nemoto. It’s to be expected. The yakuza aren’t what they used to be— reduced to designated villain organizations,” Yakuza? These two are yakuza? Leave it to Katsuki to attract the weirdest of

weirdos. That shit is as good as obsolete in the modern world. “But there’s a power vacuum, right now, in the underground. A vacuum itching to be filled. I’ve got plans, but I need strength and reputation to implement them. One way to get that, is an alliance with the League. And the League…” a hard tap, “They want *you*. You’re my bargaining chip.”

So this is about the League then. He tenses. Shit. Will he have to—? *No. Don’t think about that now.*

“Seems that got under your skin. The League is a sore spot then? Figures…” A pause. “But what I’m most curious about is *why* they want you. There are many rumors going around. That you can force quirks to activate or touch quirk factors… I’d also like to know, how you lived through an encounter with All For One *without* joining him. As far as I’ve seen from records and recordings of you before this, all you are is a normal kid with a better-than-average quirk. So what’s your secret?”

“I ain’t telling you shit.”

Harder tapping. Is he mad? “You see, quirks are a plague. Heroism and villainy, those are illnesses brought about by that plague. Everyone in this world is ill. They don’t understand the true nature of quirks. They get drunk on the power and never think about the source. Quirks are an anomaly, a freak occurrence. They’re unsanitary — I want to get rid of them. And I’ve already made the drugs to do it.” Katsuki’s mind floods with memories of Suneater and his broken quirk. *Are they connected?* “But it’ll take me a while to distribute those drugs widely, and the more methods I have the better. So I’m curious — what are the extents of your quirk manipulation abilities?”

“The hell do you mean ‘drugs to get rid of quirks’?” Katsuki asks, growing restless by the incessant tapping on his ankle.

Overhaul reaches into his pocket for a small, leather-wrapped metallic case. He opens it with one hand and shows Katsuki five small cylinders. Bullets.

“They’re quirk erasing. A shot with this will break the quirk factor down until it turns to nothing.”

“…Cool.” Overhaul seems very unsatiated by Katsuki’s lack of enthusiasm. What’s he supposed to do, jump for joy? He’s kind of strapped down here.

“So, what are the extents of your abilities. I’d appreciate it if you could be honest without struggle. That would be… cleaner.”

He talks a lot. Idiots tend to do that because they can’t get to the point. “I ain’t helping you destroy quirks or whatever the fuck. Not interested in sucking up to people.”

“I’m giving you a chance to work with me without any pain or discomfort.”

“And I’m telling you to fuck off.”

Caw-caw man’s gaze tightens, and assistant #2, who’s been awfully quiet since his boss began his little monologue, shifts with unease.

“Would you like to test one of these bullets out?”

It’s a threat. Not a bad one, just not one that will work on Katsuki. “I don’t got a quirk anyway, so shoot ahead.”

“You’re quirkless?!”

“Yup.” He pops the ‘p’. He’s even getting annoyed at himself, Overhaul must be close to losing it.

“Then how is it that you touch quirks?!”

Katsuki turns his head to the side childishly. “Not saying, fucker—”

The tapping stops, time alongside it. Katsuki chokes on an inhale, and when he exhales his left side lights up in agony. All he can do is watch as his entire left leg up and explodes in a spray of blood and muscle and atomized clothing. Immediately, his vision clouds over with pain, and he’s too out of it to stop himself from screaming. Then, as fast as it disappeared, his leg is back in place, like nothing ever happened at all. Hell, it feels better than when they started.

He notes his harsh breathing and tries to get himself under control, glaring at the cold medical lamp above the chair, cringing at the memories it drags up. What the fuck was that?!

“I don’t think you quite understand the position you’re in. You’re no guest. If you don’t cooperate, all I have to do is take you apart and find out what makes you tick myself.” Overhaul’s now ungloved hand comes up to wrap itself around Katsuki’s ankle, and this time he jerks violently at the skin-on-skin contact. He doesn’t want to be a lab rat.

He could barely stand it the first time. “Nemoto, ask him again.”

“What can you do to quirks?”

His mouth, the traitor, talks before he can think twice. “I— I can make them go haywire.”

“How can you do that?”

“By touching them.”

“What does that mean? What part do you touch?”

“The quirk.” He can’t let them know about the aura shit. If there are rumors of him as Bakugou Katsuki being able to touch quirks and also rumors about the assistant at the Sun shop being able to touch quirks, someone might put two and two together and connect the dots. Then they’ll be in trouble.

“That’s not a real answer.”

“Don’t care.”

“Why can you do that— touch quirks?”

“Don’t fucking know.” The grip on his ankle tightens. A warning. “I don’t fucking know, for real! I’m a ghost or some shit like that.”

“It seems you refuse to take this seriously…” Nemoto whispers something to Overhaul, who nods. Then he addresses Katsuki again. “Do you hate yourself?”

“What the fuck—”

“Do you hate yourself?” he repeats, firmer.

“Yes.”

“You don’t think you deserve to be a hero. You think no one else thinks you deserve to be a hero. Yet you still crave heroism regardless. You’ve acted as a vigilante even when it was none of your business—

“I happened to be there—!” he justifies.

“—You convince yourself you just happened to be there, but you know that’s not the full story. You seek situations where you can get to be heroic to feel better about yourself. Despite the fact that

everyone turned their backs on you and labeled you a monster you refuse to see the truth and accept that they're right. Deep down you know you're cut out to be a villain and have the fighting instincts of one, but you refuse to stoop to that level out of worthless pride. Instead, you cling to pathetic dreams of heroics both you and everyone around you know are unattainable. Else, you would've kept your head down like everyone else at that store. Without heroics, you're an empty shell, and you were never heroic in the first place."

Everyone but you sees it. Bullying that kid, you've already built a ton of XP. Why do you make it harder on yourself by wanting to change skill halfway through playing?

His quirk is on and not a single time has Katsuki been compelled to correct him. That means that whatever this idiot is saying— Katsuki thinks it's true. He's heard this spiel dozens of times, his head has replayed it for him dozens more. Has he listened to this bullshit so much that he's started to believe it?

Or have the villains been right from the start? Has he accepted these words as truth without even realizing it, because that's what they are, the truth?

He remembers how easy it was to stab Flower Head, how good he used to feel when he could let loose and push Deku around. The medical light blurs and spins. He says nothing. Assistant #2 may be right, but it's not gonna do him any favors in the information gathering department.

"You're easy enough to read. I know everything about you. No one in your old life is ever going to accept you for who you are. So give in and make yourself useful in a new place —in one where your kind belongs."

"No."

"You're stubborn… then… Where have you been staying for the past few months?"

He freezes, heart thumping wildly. The aura thickened air closes in around him, suffocating until he submits the answer. But he thinks about the shop— home and finds that he can't. *No way. They'll ruin everything. They'll target healer hag to get to me. They'll make her explode like Flower Head. I can't. I can't.*

He tries something he's never tried before, touching an aura with a

part of his body that isn't his hands. His face burns with the contact, the aura sticking to his skin like a horrid, jelly mask, and assistant two recoils in confusion, or perhaps fear.

"In a gutter," he spits out, shaking his head and watching the aura wobble and dissipate. "It's real nice and warm. Plenty of rats. I bet you'd love it, you germaphobic chicken wannabes—" That last part earns Katsuki another exploded leg. Fuck, that hurts. That hurts like hell. And the fact that it comes right back somehow makes it worse, because the phantom pain continues to tingle like a thousand burning needles despite his body being perfectly okay.

"That was a lie," announces assistant #2, voice shaky and twice as animated as it was before. "He did something to my quirk that allowed him to lie! I felt it."

The pressure lifts. A bead of sweat runs down his temple. His gaze stays glued on the lamp above him. Did they get what they wanted? Are they done? Please tell him they're done.

They're not done, Overhaul and assistant #2 come back ten minutes later, clad in surgeon scrubs and rolling forward a supply caddy. He hears something being uncapped, smells the ethyl alcohol, and flinches hard.

as gloved hands rub disinfectant over his skin

"No," he says, "No no no no don't touch me! Don't fucking touch me with that doctor shit—"

"I wasn't lying when I said I'd pick you apart."

"I'll kill you," he whispers and feels himself begin to disconnect from his body at the first burn of a scalpel cut. "You'll fucking regret this."

It's happening again. He's letting it happen again. He's so fucking worthless.

"Looking at you… I know I won't."

The common room is cool at night. The drapes are open, framing the starry sky outside. Izuku almost trips over a stray phone charger as he walks. Asui's favorite blanket has been forgotten on the couch. He folds it up with far more care than he would if it was his own blanket, sets it to the side, and sinks into the couch, sighing.

“Deku-kun?” He startles, turning his head to face the voice. It’s Uraraka with Asui close behind. Even Asui’s usually neat hair is a sleep-tussled mess, and Uraraka’s is sticking up at awkward angles. Izuku imagines he looks much the same. He can hardly get his curls under control under normal circumstances, never mind after waking in the middle of the night.

“Hi,” he says, fatigued but managing a small smile. He makes room for them on the couch.

“Did you get a text too, Midoriya-chan?”

“Mhm… I think it was a group text.” He looks down at his phone, the screen too bright in the unlit common room. They’re supposed to gather tomorrow morning. The operation begins at eight am, but they’ll need to be at their agencies earlier for preparations.

“I’m kind of surprised we’re doing this in the morning and not at night,” says Uraraka. She lowers her voice from normal level to whisper halfway through the sentence. With the room so quiet, the smallest sound takes up too much space —feels overwhelming.

“That would be the most typical, yeah…” Izuku replies, “But we’ll probably find out more details in the morning. I haven’t been told much so far, at least.”

“Same here.”

Silence. Izuku sinks further into the couch, fidgeting with his knuckles, cracking them back and forth soundlessly. He thinks of the little girl in the alley, of her white hair and terrified red eyes, of the way she refused to let his hold go, of the way she begged Izuku not to leave her with that small voice. He blinks and his hands are clenching and unclenching around the material of his pajama pants. He shouldn’t have let her go.

A few meters away, the elevator dings open, flooding the landing with diffused light. Kirishima steps out, hair unstyled. His eyes catch on the rest of them sitting on the couch and he rushes over, uttering a hushed greeting. As soon as he sits down, he seems restless.

“It would be better to get sleep right now, but I can’t,” he confesses as he keeps shifting, trying to find some sort of sitting position that will work away his excess energy. He opts for pulling his legs up against his chest on the couch and leaning on the armrest. He smiles a toothy smile, but it’s obvious he’s nervous.

“That’s why I came down,” Izuku says. “Wanted to clear my head.”

“We shouldn’t stay long though. We can’t be tired tomorrow.” Asui is right, but no one moves to leave.

“I’m nervous,” Uraraka says, finally putting into words what all of them are thinking.

“It’s our first time…” Well, in technical terms it’s their third, between USJ and the training camp. For Kirishima and Izuku there’s also Kamino, then for Izuku himself, there’s the provisional license exam and Toga Himiko. They’re a lot more experienced than your average first years, and Izuku isn’t sure if that’s a good or bad thing. Yet, despite having been in situations like this before, the nerves never simmer down.

It almost feels worse. Because at USJ and the camp and the exam they were the ones getting attacked, while Kamino, was more save and run than legitimate operation. This time, it’s serious. They’re teaming up with pros, with people from the police —four agencies and a dozen freelance heroes are involved. This isn’t a plan strung together in the heat of the moment, or an unexpected fight for survival. This is a calculated offensive. Despite the fact that they’re only interns, people are counting on them to pull their own weights and make the raid a success.

If they mess up, it won’t just be them shouldering the consequences. They’ll be messing things up for everyone. People could *die*.

Such thoughts swirl in Izuku’s mind, mixing together into a muddle, dancing with Nighteye’s All Might prophesy and his talks with the previous users of One for All (because that’s a thing now, a thing that was not in the terms and conditions of this power) and the crushing weight of the title of successor and the ever-present background noise of “where has Kacchan been staying?”. It’s a mess, Izuku’s head. If even a single thing more is piled on his plate, he might burst.

He groans softly, catching Kirishima’s sympathetic eyes.

“We’ll be fine,” says Asui. She’s always blunt, so the admission calms Izuku down a little. “Panicking won’t do us any good. We’ve trained hard and we’ll have support. As long as we follow instructions, it’ll go as planned.” Every sentence is punctuated by her unique speech quirks, and the familiarity of it helps Izuku relax further.

“The League might show up from the start and force us to sit out

altogether." Izuku bristles at the mention of them. At the briefing, Bubble Girl mentioned the League had been in talks with the Hassaikai for a while, and they weren't sure where the current relationship between them stood. After the briefing was over and done with, Sensei had pulled all the UA student interns to the side and told them that if the League got involved at any point they'd be out, immediately. Even the third years, who hadn't been targeted before.

After what happened with Kacchan, Izuku guesses they aren't willing to take any chances.

Too bad Kacchan had to become a test dummy for them to realize that.

Ah, I'm thinking about that again. He shakes his head.

"I don't think so…" says Uraraka. Izuku can tell she's treading carefully, likely for his sake. "Though it's more a hunch than anything."

"I hope you're right." Izuku does too. If he sees someone from the League again, he's not sure what he'll do.

For a while, maybe a minute maybe ten, they sit like that, comforted by the fact that everyone is there together and alive. If Izuku listens closely, he can make out the individual breathing patterns of every person, and the little differences between each one. That may be a little creepy, but it at least tells him everyone is fine with clear bold letters, so he's willing to bear to awkwardness. There are a lot of things Izuku can't share, but that doesn't mean he hasn't used his three friends as a crutch, however subtly. He's still happy that he doesn't need to be the only intern in this operation, as much as he wishes he could handle everything alone and take the weight off everyone else's shoulders.

"Let's do our best and come back safe tomorrow," he says, both a promise and a prayer. His three classmates offer murmurs of agreement. Asui —ever sleepy in the winter— yawns, and that breaks the spell. They're all getting up, heading for the lifts and muttering goodnights.

Uraraka tugs on Izuku's sleeve when they're by the elevator, giving him a meaningful look, and they let Kirishima and Asui head upstairs first.

In the dark of the common room, Izuku can barely see her.

“Will your quirk be okay— for tomorrow?” she asks, leaning on the wall.

One for All went and had an evolution, at the provisional license exam. He’d been hyperfocused on saving all the mock civilians stuck with him in a building from an Inasa-made hurricane barreling straight towards them, and the desperate need to keep everyone in the air had activated “Float”.

That night, a beautiful woman, All Might’s master, had appeared to him in a dream, flanked by a handful of other figures.

“Our quirk factors were also passed down, they’re now part of One for All’s core,“ she’d told him, ”You were so fixated on saving everyone my quirk activated. Things will get bumpy for you from here, ninth.“

He’d gone to All Might right after waking up, and the man had promised to gather him any information he could on their predecessors. Then, now that Izuku had his provisional license, they’d all but begged Togata-senpai to introduce Izuku to Sir Nighteye. Sir didn’t accept Izuku, and it was quite the shock to discover that Togata-senpai had been a candidate to inherit All Might’s power before Izuku came along. Sir became more interested when he found out Izuku had unlocked an entirely new aspect of the quirk, but things were still rocky between them.

The only reason he’d accepted Izuku, was to get him to give up on the power. Needless to say, that doesn’t feel the best.

But Izuku is both used to being dismissed and not a quitter, as sad as the implications of that may be, so he’s not about to roll over and accept Nighteye’s demands. In fact, he’ll prove himself worthy, again and again, no matter how many times it takes. The last thing he wants is All Might regretting his choice of successor.

Putting all that aside, he’d joined Nighteye’s agency a week ago, *right* after earning his provisional license, and on their very first day of patrol, he and Togata-senpai had come across the little girl in the alley. The crux of the Hassaikai’s operation. Sir’s agency had been investigating the Hassaikai for a while and long suspected some sort of foul play on their part— they’d researched, contacted many hero agencies, and discovered most of the Yakuza’s hidden safe houses in advance. They had been waiting for an excuse to issue an official warrant. It was only thanks to that alley encounter and Amajiki-senpai and Kirishima being hit by quirk erasing bullets on a routine patrol

that the dots at last connected. Things went fast from there, and in barely five days the operation is planned and ready.

Izuku's float quirk is still unstable, so Uraraka has been helping him, considering both quirks are somewhat similar. She doesn't know about One for All though. It would be far too risky.

"I think so," Izuku replies, watching the numbers on the elevator go up and stop at Kirishima and Asui's floors. "Thanks for helping me out."

"It's no biggie— it's training for me too," she says lightly, turning to the lift and pressing the call-down button. They wait for the elevator to arrive. "Deku-kun?"

"Yeah?"

"We'll save Eri-chan. For sure." Another promise. He half wishes he had a dandelion to blow apart to "guarantee" the wish will come true like his mother used to do for him as a kid. But saving Eri isn't a wish, it's a requirement. And he knows Uraraka knows that too. There's no leaving it up to higher powers, it's up to them. They're heroes now.

"For sure," he repeats. The elevator arrives and makes enough light for them to see what they're doing. Izuku holds out his fist and Uraraka bumps it.

The raid will be a success. It has to be.

When he's upstairs and under his covers, he flips open his phone and opens his chats with Kacchan. It's been a bit since they last talked.

[You] 03:05

i hope you're doing okay

"How long has it been?" he asks, picking at the measured, clinical slices on his palms. Overhaul the bastard could very well heal him in full, could probably even fix all the scarring Katsuki has going on everywhere, and his stupid, achy wrist. But he's a piece of trash so he didn't do that. He heals Katsuki enough to stop the bleeding but not the pain, it's the goddamn doctor all over again.

Scratch that, at least the doctor never *took his goddamn organs out*. Overhaul plays Katsuki as if Katsuki is the gameboard of one of those

kiddy cardboard operation simulations. Fucking hell. His misguided and naively hopeful mind had convinced itself he'd experienced about every medical torture possible, but he'd been wrong, so fucking wrong. He's pretty sure Overhaul took out his eyes at one point, because they "may have a mutation that allows him to see quirks differently and need to be analyzed." That was the worst five minutes to five hours of his life, including all the times he's almost died.

He's been in and out of that dentist room half a dozen times now, and every session blurs together more than the last. He doesn't remember anything coherent from them but humiliation and disgust. His clothes are gone too, he's only given ugly ass hospital smocks. Was the doctor nice to him by torture standards? He may not have felt human with the League, but here he doesn't even feel like an animal, he feels like nothing. Like a worthless sack of skin and bones to be picked apart. And Overhaul's never even gonna find anything inside, because his body is, bar all the nitroglycerin, normal.

The shit going on with him is supernatural, not genetic or physical. But Katsuki hasn't spilled shit. Around Overhaul now, he's as good as mute. It's kind of funny in a macabre way, watching purple collar grow more and more frustrated with every failure.

For all his obsessions with cleanliness, Overhaul sure knows how to make people feel fucking filthy.

His guard, this dude with buzzcut hair, a sloppy suit, boonies accent, and a burnt yellow, powdery aura, pushes at the skin of his cuticles. "Round four days, give or take." Katsuki believes him. He likes the guy. A no-nonsense no-lies sort of dude. Obviously, a piece of shit, if he's sitting by while stuff like this happens, but a respectable piece of shit nonetheless. When he's not in the operating room, he's in here. Surprise surprise, another cell. Though this is more akin to a temporary cell you'll see at a police station. The bars are solid, but they're wide, his arm can fit between them comfortably. He's also got a bench thing to sit and sleep at, he gets escorted to an actual bathroom whenever he needs it, and he gets proper food (which he doesn't eat but that's beside the point).

It's half-good half-bad? Decent?

Who's he kidding. He hates it.

One of the slices on Katsuki's palms starts to bleed from all his denting. Good. He moves on to the slice next to it.

Four days. Already too long. Four days of no food for Satsu. Four days of healer hag having to take care of the shop on her own. God forbid she be looking for him. Fuck. She's probably worried. How does he even explain this? *I got caught by more villains and I may or may not be missing a few inner body bits?*

Blood's pooling in his palm. He might make himself sick, like this.

"M' surprised ya haven't tried to make a run for it yet ta be honest," says Buzzcut guard.

"Too tired, not worth it," Katsuki says simply, leaning back into the wall. The bench is made of solid wood and digs into his backside all wrong. Another cut gives and reopens from his abuse. More blood. Good.

He's been thinking. Watching the hallways. He disconnects almost completely during Overhaul's actual experiments, but the moments before and after are clear and crisp for him. He's alert and in overdrive, taking in every detail, building a mental map. He's been doing it for three days now.

"Yer a masochist." For some reason, Buzzcut guard finds his own observation funny. His laugh is thin and hiccuping, way funnier than any of the words that come out of his mouth. "Or a' least with a few screws loose. The only way a person can stay normal after bein' the Young Boss' toy is if their normal were never normal in tha' first place."

"I'm not into chuuni crap," Katsuki dismisses. There's so much blood in his palm now it's dripping down his wrist and staining the blue sleeves of his smock a glowing orange-red. He's lightheaded. "I need to take a piss," he informs, standing up and disguising the shake of his legs.

"Ya jus' went."

"Should I start pissing right here then?"

Buzzcut shudders, lip curling. "God no, that's disgustin'." He gets out of his chair and comes near the door of the cell, scouring the pockets of his suit for the keycard. "Yer such a—"

Katsuki grabs his collar with his left hand, making sure to touch his aura, and slams him forward into the bars. Buzzcut panics, frantically looking at where Katsuki's hand is, unable to figure out what he's

feeling. Without giving him time to counterattack, Katsuki shoves his right palm, the one that's bleeding, in Buzzcut's mouth, in a way that guarantees he'll ingest Katsuki's blood.

Nitroglycerin, aside from being explosive, may be prescribed as an over-the-counter drug to treat say heart issues, like angina. Upon being taken, it drops blood pressure, spawning the lovely side effects of dizziness and feeling faint. The nitro-like content of his blood only seems to get bigger and bigger the longer he stays quirkless, and it's around half as potent as his sweat used to be now. Buzzcut's legs give out on him and Katsuki slams him into the bars, again and again, until he appears to have passed out. The keycard clatters to the floor. Katsuki lets Buzzcut go, opens his cell door with the keycard, and after stealing any other card or key that may come in handy from Buzzcut's pockets, leaves the guard inside the cell he was meant to be guarding and locks him in there.

He wipes his right hand on his smock, repulsed by himself.

There *is* a reason he hasn't tried to make a run for it before. He's been waiting, watching for the right time. He's got no intention of staying here. He's going home.

And if the Shie Hassaikai goes down in the process, will anyone blame him?

Chapter End Notes

1) is katsuki about to ruin the entire overhaul raid for everyone but eri by accident? yes he is
2) next chapter gets somehow messier if you can believe it I don't know why I put Katsuki through this stuff.
3) there's like zero fluff this time... next chapter is bad but eri is in it. this one is just bleak overload
4) katsuki trying to convince himself he's calmer than before in every scene when he's actually slowly unraveling. this chapter is me basically shoving all of katsuki's triggers in a pinata and bashing it repeatedly with an iron spiked club. i didn't feel like going into the details of what overhaul did to him here because 1)I don't want things to feel overly gratuitous and 2)it's gonna be built on in future chapters.
5) I genuinely went and did the research for eye removal surgery which is an actual irl thing for this fic I'm lucky my attention span is so short that I never dwell on disturbing imagery for long because those pictures would've probably fucked me up

otherwise. major props to all the surgeons and medical professionals out there who deal with that kind of stuff daily and hold all that responsibility for human lives in their hands y'all are amazing.
6) I've also been watching a lot of criminology documentaries recently they're so interesting.
7) manga spoilers but I'm so happy katsuki finally showed up again
8) Izuku does have 6quirks here, but it won't really be a major plot point. I just need the AFO OFA similarities. I actually rewatched overhaul arc before writing this section as a little refresher, and in the canon arc, mirio and izuku come across eri THEN the real deep investigation into the hassaikai begins, in this fic it's the opposite, the heroes already had all the info on the Hassaikai, so the only thing they needed was a reason to get in there, which came about in the form of Eri meeting Mirio and Izuku. Too bad they're not gonna save her this time XD
9) thought I should put in some actual scummy villains lol
10) I always wonder if how I talk about the triggers in the summary is overkill then I think better overkill than underkill and leave it at that.
11) I've been waiting about 327374 years to pull the nitroglycerin trick lmao
12) chuuni is the short form of Chuunibyou (中二病 / 厨二病) the Japanese term for eighth-grader syndrome sufferer. to quote TV tropes: often-derisive Japanese slang term for the embarrassing behavior of 13-to-14-year-olds. The term literally means "Middle [School] 2[nd Year] Syndrome" (often translated as "Eighth-Grader Syndrome" in US media)
13) buzzcut is just a random throwaway OC
14) I super apologize for leaving a ton of comments unreplied to in the last chapter my brain has been utterly fried and very ineffective at stringing together proper sentences. but know that comments are half the reason I have the motivation to write this fic so I am always always grateful for them
15) "uraraka" sounds so awkward to me for some reason I'm always tempted to just give in and call her ochako but it wouldn't fit with what izuku calls her sobs.
16) I cannot believe this fic has over 110k words right now as someone who used to struggle with writing 2k that's mind boggling to me. like man I've written a whole novel length thing this is new

Chapter 17: Déjà vu

Chapter Summary

Everyone needs a prayer.

(Triggers um... the worst graphic descriptions of violence this fic has had so far, gore and blood, implied/referenced prior human experimentation, overhaul's victim-blaming, and katsuki being very triggered and teetering on the edge of a mental breakdown. he also has a brief stint as a zombie)

Chapter Notes

so...

waiting a week to post this has been agony. part of me is worried that it won't live up to the hype, but much like with chapter 12, some of these scenes have been in my drafts for months. this is a damn important chapter and probably the darkest this fic will ever get.

ill write the rest of my notes at the end

and thank you so so so much for 30k+ hits and 1.5k+ kudos and over 400 comments it's honestly baffling and humbling and I'm so so grateful. i never expected this kind of reception when I started posting this but all of you and your reactions seriously make me look forward to writing and editing and posting every week so thank you! i love you all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Callous, brutal, inhuman, volatile, heartless, cruel… if you open the thesaurus on the section for sadistic, every synonym in there Katsuki has, at one point or another, been called.

It was somewhere around mid-may when they had their first and only ethics class at UA, meant to be a taste test for the actual full course they'd be taking in the second year. Aizawa and Hound dog lectured for ninety minutes on the ethical differences between heroes, vigilantes, and villains. It was entry-level shit. Shit anyone who was serious about heroism would've read about since they were ten. Heroes follow the law to a tee, they aren't allowed to kill and purposeful debilitating injury of opponents is frowned upon in ninety

percent of scenarios. Inability to subdue a villain should be considered a tragedy and personal failure —some textbooks posited.

If he's honest, he had a hard time paying attention to the class. Of course, he took notes and treated it the same as he treated any regular class —he was a top student and he intended to stay one— but he found himself scowling and pulling faces at every other sentence. Because most of it was well, idealistic naïve flowery bullshit.

You're not supposed to enjoy hurting villains? Utter crap. The notion was false by principle as far as the Katsuki of back then was concerned. Fighting and winning felt *good*. Point blank. It released shit like adrenaline and dopamine that made you feel invincible. It's the way human brains and bodies are wired. No one can deny the sweet satisfaction of delivering a good sucker punch unless they're a huge liar. There's a reason people hit punching bags as stress relief and sports like boxing are so popular and well-liked.

Katsuki liked to think he was a bit of an expert in that field, as someone who'd grown up picking fights because of how good winning made him feel. And it was rarely with people weaker — only losers measure themselves against losers— it was against smug upperclassmen and annoying assholes with superiority complexes (he now realizes that used to be a pretty good description of himself). Proving them wrong and beating them into the ground felt fucking *stellar*. The weaker people? He'd laugh at them. The only exception was Deku, because his thing with Deku was always an exception, and Deku wasn't weak, not really.

Not few times had he been told he only wanted to be a hero so he would have the legal freedom to beat people up and get paid for it, and while that was far from the truth (putting his actual motivation into words was a pain in the ass and hard as hell— though it would surely include a lot of All Might) he wasn't gonna deny that getting to beat people up *was* a perk. The adrenaline of a good fight was addictive and he couldn't go long without it.

So he'd thought, hero ethics class? Trash.

This is what he finds himself remembering as he dashes through the halls of the Hassaikai's basement. The place is… oddly empty. He expected more people buzzing around, but it's just him and the concrete walls. He's leaving a pretty trail of blood from where his un-bandaged arm is dripping onto the floor and he's taking full advantage of that ghost-ish inability to make noise by stepping on shit, running

without care.

The building's design is as cliché as it gets. Sad elongated LEDs pinned to the ceilings, plain unpainted walls, ugly stone floors, and this horrible, pungent smell of villain and not enough fresh air. There are exposed cables and snaking, leaky pipes of every length and diameter poking from various places in the walls. It ticks off every box for a suck-ass villain dungeon. He bets they hired a shitty architect and went: “I want the most horrid, convoluted, and annoying villain lair you can cook up,” then got the architect to make the plans drunk to add some extra spice.

It’s annoying because he’s hit four dead ends, and no matter where he runs there’s no stairwell anywhere. How the hell does this place work? He’d been moved into that cell room when he was sleeping, so he can’t follow the route he was brought here through, and when he tries to head for the dentist torture room, he finds the usual opening blocked like it was never there in the first place. It’s as though someone has tampered with the walls.

At some point he wraps his palm up with the corner of his shirt, realizing all the blood could lead anyone back to him. *That’s a rookie-ass mistake. Has the blood loss made me stupid?*

The déjà vu starts on the sixth path he runs into. He doesn't mean to do it, he’s walking a hall when he hears voices coming straight for him — one belonging to Overhaul’s first assistant, the one who’d carried him at the pier, another unfamiliar. Unsure of his next steps and wanting to avoid as many confrontations as possible, he ducks into the hallway adjacent to the one he was walking. It’s lined with vault-style metallic doors, and it’s a dead end. For some reason, he shivers.

“—should be here soon.” They’ve rounded the corner, but the voices are still far enough to echo.

“…girl trieeeeed… esssssscape aahgain…bosssss will be pisseeeed.” The words are interrupted by *hics,* as though he’s listening to a drunkard.

Shuffling, stumbled footsteps. “…be coming down… speak privately… her…”

“…shooooould… waaaaaait….” The steps stop. Katsuki is glued to the wall. If they keep going they’ll eventually see him. He can’t walk back from where he came lest he walks straight into their line of sight. And he can’t confront them either, it would be two on one and he’s

starving and ready to bleed from about half a hundred poorly healed places. He's an adrenaline junky, not stupid.

So he heads for the vault door closest to the dead end and tries the keycards he looted off Buzzcut one by one. The first two do nothing, but swiping the third brings forth a release of pressure, and the door pops open a little. From there, he pulls it open himself, making sure to make as little noise as possible, slipping inside, and closing it back up. As soon as it's closed again he hears the sound of another pop, and he realizes the door locked itself. *Shit.* It's one of those automatically locking ones. Did he fuck himself over?

A quick survey of the door proves that no, he did not fuck himself over, there's another slot to swipe a card on the inside too, disguised between pieces of framing. He breathes a sigh of relief and turns around to look at where he's at.

It's a kid's room.

Wooden paneling is inlaid on the bottom half of the wall, the floor is a warm tile, and the upper parts of the wall are clad in a sky blue wallpaper patterned with clouds and rainbows. There are no windows, but a myriad of nightlights sit on a solid wood chest of drawers placed at the left corner, next to what seems to be a walk-in closet double door. The floor is littered with toys, but half of them are unopened, and the other half, even though they're out of their boxes, look to be in pristine condition —like they haven't been played with at all. Opposite the chest of drawers, next to the door, is a wooden desk in a similar aesthetic build, then last, flush with the right wall, is the headboard of a big bed, piled high with pillows and duvets sitting in a messy lump.

It's pretty damn fancy. Bigger than the room Katsuki had at his parents' house, and his parents were firmly upper-middle class. Katsuki is frozen by the door. By itself, there's nothing wrong with the room, but the three unpleasant facts that one, they are in a villain's evil basement, two, there is zero natural light, and three, everything is very much not lived in, make it unsettling.

There's a sickly sweet smell in the air, like someone comes in daily and burns candles labeled "Sugar, spice & everything nice" in an effort to suffocate any other scent, and aside from the messy bed, the rest of the room feels artificial, stolen from a magazine of "children's ideal bedrooms" without any input from the actual kid living in it. It's all scarily generic.

Not wanting anything to do with whatever the hell is going on in here, he quickly turns around and fumbles with his key cards again, trying and failing to get the vault to open. The card he used to get inside isn't working.

He's about to curse when he hears a whimper and nearly shits himself.

After taking a deep breath in, Katsuki whips his head around and surveys the room, but nothing seems to have changed. Are his ears playing tricks on him?

Nope, there it is again. So quiet. Barely there. Another whimper. It's coming from the mess of covers on the bed. Now that he's looking at them closer, they seem to be shaking. There's something under them.

It's none of my business it's none of my business it's none of my business—

He powerwalks up to the bed and yanks the covers off it hard. It's a fucking kid. She's got long white hair and a tattered dress and bandages all over. Her aura is this big watery gold, and it's tangible enough that it didn't show through the blankets. More déjà vu. Why does he have the worst feeling? The girl whimpers and flinches as she looks up at him, and the fear in her eyes almost makes him flinch back. "What the fuck?" Katsuki says, gaping, and the girl shields herself with her bandaged arms, shaking more.

"What the actual fuck?"

"I'm sorry! I won't do it again! D—don't hurt m—me, p—please."

Um.

He never signed up for this.

Katsuki stares at her for two beats, then at the door, then at her again. "Who the fuck are you? What are you doing here?" he finds himself asking, instead of turning around, running out that door, and saving his own ass. What the hell is *he* doing? The best strategy he has for dealing with small children besides *not* dealing with them is ignoring them, and he's already thrown that strategy in the trash.

The girl says nothing. Not giving Katsuki much to work with here.

"You want me to leave?" he asks next. Consider other people's needs and requests, right? That's what good people do, right?

This time, she nods almost imperceptibly. “I w—want everyone t—to leave.” Oh wow, edgy much?

But there’s something so very wrong about this whole situation, about the unlived-in room and the bandages all over her and the fact that she’s fucking terrified. What’s a kid even doing down here? Who would ever leave their daughter in this shit-ass fucking torture basement?

…girl tried… escape again…boss will be pissed.

His eyes widen and he feels the sickest he’s felt all day. No way. She’s tiny. *She can’t be older than five.* Overhaul’s a psycho bastard but he’s not *that* sick. Right? *Right*—?

He *is* that sick who the hell is Katsuki giving the benefit of the doubt to?!

“Kid—”

They both flinch as the seal on the door breaks.

…be coming down… speak privately… her…

Fuck.

Katsuki turns around and sure enough, that’s fucking Overhaul standing at the door. His heart falls to his ass as his feet brace themselves on the floor on instinct.

Everything is calm for exactly two counts then Overhaul is splaying his fingers onto the wall at his side seeping his muddy aura into it to make it burst outwards into a field of spikes. Katsuki dodges, jumping backward in the nick of time. He wasn’t fast enough to save one of his arms from getting grazed. He hisses, putting more distance between him and Overhaul as subtly as he can.

“How did you get out?” Overhaul asks calmly, like Katsuki is a minor inconvenience, like he’s found a cockroach under his bed that needs to be stepped on. And fuck does that attitude make Katsuki *mad*, fuck does it make the pride he thought he had none left of rear it’s ugly, ambitious head. No threat at all is he?

There’s mud everywhere and everything explodes outward again. Katsuki uses his speed to his advantage, jumping on the chest of drawers and knocking over all the nightlights in the process. He grabs

one that looks like it's made of glass and chucks it straight at Overhaul, who dodges enough that the light impacts the wall and shatters into a million pieces harmlessly. He sees Overhaul's aura spread to the wall behind him and knows it's gonna explode, so he leaps from the chest of drawers forward, grabbing onto the frame of the walk-in closet door. The closet door is wooden, and, while the rest of the wall turns to spikes, it doesn't. Looks like it takes extra effort for this dude to change materials abruptly.

That's how it goes on, walls and floors constantly closing in while Katsuki jumps around like a wannabe spider and chucks every piece of rubble he can get his hands on at Overhaul. He's avoiding Overhaul's attacks alright, but he's already sustained shit tons of damage from all the movement alone, and he knows, he's the one at a disadvantage. He hasn't done any damage to purple collar at all. The only reason he's even still alive is that the room is big enough for him to maneuver fast.

Damnit. This guy's quirk is too fucking overpowered. It has more than enough range and next to zero limitations. As he's forced to pull some acrobatics to avoid the tenth round of spikes, these ones shaped to target him, he finds himself missing Explosion in a way he's never missed before. If only he could Howitzer Overhaul's stupid face, if only.

"I was going to come get you anyway. Thank you for making my job easier," says Overhaul. He's so comfortable he hasn't bothered to move more than a few steps forward or back. Katsuki hates him. Hates the way he has to stop himself from flinching when the aura comes close. Hates the way Overhaul makes him feel. Wants to fucking rip him apart.

When a spike goes and pierces through his leg, Katsuki grunts in pain and knows they can't keep going like this. He either goes on the offensive or he's fucked. And if Overhaul's weapon is his quirk, Katsuki's weapon has to be the ability to mess with that quirk. It's the only thing he's got. Either he attacks now, or he's gonna die down here. Or worse, Overhaul will spear him and put him back together into some shoddy shadow of himself and he'll stay a lab rat for the rest of his life.

"Fuck you," he hears himself saying, as he reaches for the aura spread all over the wall behind him in an effort to make contact with it.

It takes half a split second. If you ask him to describe it, the only thing

he'd be able to say is blank. Because that's what it is. One moment he's doing fine, he's on a mission, he's locked on to his objective, the next the tile under and beside him jerks, shifting into a soft substance as more of Overhaul's aura invades the space then hardening and turning itself outward, transforming into another field of spikes.

A blinding pain tears through Katsuki's chest, and when he coughs bright globs of blood land on the ruined floor. He tries to will his body to move, but all he gets is stabs of pain. He feels organs and tissue ripping, and when he looks down he sees the spike with bleary eyes, massive in diameter, spearing him straight through the chest and nailing him to the wall. The front of the spike is painted in what he assumes are his insides.

Oh wow, he thinks. *Is this it? That was over fast…*

That nauseating déjà vu that's been simmering this whole time comes to a boil, spilling over onto the floor to join his neon blood.

He coughs again, feeling lines of liquid drip from his lips, inhaling but getting none of the sweet relief of air in his lungs. There's no way, there's no way he's living through this. It doesn't even feel like he has lungs anymore. His spine must be cut in half.

I really am a loser. How do I keep getting myself into these situations?

Breaths going nowhere grow quicker and shallower as his body spasms, orange-red blood splattered everywhere. It's over. This time, it has to be. All that struggling, and for what?

I never got to give the books back. I promised Healer hag six months minimum. I'm the only one who knows Satsu's favorite food brand. He's gonna get hungry.

I never got to say goodbye.

Katsuki's vision goes black.

He's floating and swimming at the same time, stuck in a world of nothing but white, everywhere. He's untethered, drifting, and it's nice. It's peaceful. It's peaceful until a force of a thousand tonnes tugs at him and he's smashed against something, skin breaking out into goosebumps.

"—what you made me do, Eri!" he hears Overhaul tsk. His voice is weird —like he's speaking in the podium of an empty auditorium while Katsuki is the only spectator sitting in the furthest possible seat. "See how everyone around you suffers? See how everyone who makes trouble suffers?"

Katsuki peels his eyelids open and he's met with the little brat's demolished room, still speared to the wall. The lights are on, and he has a nice view of his pink matter spattered onto the spike. He's not breathing hard anymore. He's not breathing at all. His head is clear. He blinks. *Huh.*

Why in the hell is he still not dead?

Purple Collar has his back to Katsuki, gesticulating along to his speech to the little brat. It sounds an awful lot like the drivel the doctor used to say to him.

"It's such a mess in here," Purple Collar continues, rubbing up and down the sleeves of his military jacket. Katsuki's entire body hurts, but he flexes a finger and is surprised to find it functional. His whole hand works fine actually. Make that everything. He still works, somehow, even though he's pretty sure his soul left his body two seconds ago.

Is this the afterlife? Death-induced hallucination? Does he need to finish the fight before he gets to chill with god or whoever?

Well, he thinks, *if I'm not allowed to die yet, I might as well try to get out.* He extends his feet as far as they can go, until they are nicking the ground, and latches on to that tiny bit of footing to walk forward. The first step moves him half a centimeter through the spike and it is

agonizing. Taking a hot iron and stabbing himself multiple times in rapid succession would hurt less, the friction of his innards against the spike is unbearable.

All the more reason to get off it. He keeps walking, ignoring the drag and failing miserably, trying to make as little noise as possible so that bitch Birdy Mask doesn't turn around. He blacks out a little after every step, tasting blood gathering inside his mouth.

Finally, after a grueling who knows how long, the spike becomes thin enough that the rest of it slides with ease through the hole it left, which is probably not a good thing, considering said hole is big enough that Katsuki could put both his arms through it. He can see blood and muscles and bits of his ribcage and ruined vertebrae and other should not be alive and or capable of movement level problems, but here he is. And sure it hurts like hell but he *can* still move.

He places two fingers on the juncture between his jaw joint and neck, looking for a pulse and finding none. That makes sense, considering that sad deflated lump of muscle he can see the corner of through the hole looks a whole lot like a heart. The big hole in his chest isn't the only one, there's a chunk of his arm missing too.

"—he was expendable. Whatever gimmick he could do with quirks wasn't worth the effort of getting him to talk, and his body is a walking biohazard and nothing more." Katsuki walks. The little girl is crying so much Katsuki doubts she can even see anymore, and she looks *horrified*. Her previously solid aura seems out of control, licking its way up the headboard of the bed she's stuck on. "Stay useful to me Eri. Don't force me to be crueler than you already have. Escaping is not how you do it." Katsuki keeps walking. Overhaul is something like two steps away. "No one out there wants you."

No one in your old life is ever going to accept you for who you are.

The world tilts a little.

"The only one who can keep you under control is *me*. So unless you want to end up like that—"

He turns around to point at who he thinks he murdered right as Katsuki puts a hand on his shoulder. He freezes and loses every drop of color from his face at the sight of a very much moving Katsuki. "Let's hear the end of that sentence, yeah?" Katsuki says. Overhaul's mouth gapes like a fish in shock before Katsuki socks him one to the face. He staggers back but now that he's closed the distance, Katsuki

has no intention of relenting, pushing him into the ground and rolling him around in the dust and rubble and filth Katsuki knows Overhaul *hates*, before sticking his hands right into his muddy aura. Fuck it burns. It burns *bad.* And it smells of acrid, dirty sewers.

one where your kind belongs

It's disgusting, but he spits out the blood gathered in his mouth on Overhaul's jacket and relishes in how the villain's skin breaks out into hives. "Walking biohazard am I? What happens when I slip and ignite all the biohazardous blood you graciously spread all over the room, and you go boom so bad they won't even find your ashes—?"

you know you're cut out to be a villain and have the fighting instincts of one, but you refuse to stoop to that level out of worthless pride

Overhaul actually screams when Katsuki closes his hands around the muddy aura then *yanks*, ripping a chunk of it from the rest. It begins to melt in his hands and he flings it away. The moment it hits the wall, it evaporates for good, and now the spot he got rid of is thinner, because the rest of the aura has been forced to compensate for the loss.

Oh. He can work with this.

"How— you— hole— impossible—" Overhaul sputters, looking ill. It's the first time he's spoken since he turned around and as valid as the line of thought may be, Katsuki cannot bring himself to give a shit.

Props to him though, because now that the initial shock seems to have worn off, he's already trying to get his palms on something again to use his quirk. "You have no idea how badly I wish I could rip your arms off." But he doesn't have the tools for that, so he'll do the next best thing, get rid of his quirk at the source.

"Hey brat, don't listen to anything this bitch said, okay? You didn't do shit. Run along out that door, and don't let any bastards catch you. Hide in a corner and close your eyes or something. I'm going to fucking murder this guy."

It's not a figure of speech.

you're fucked in the head

He rips two more chunks of the aura off and Overhaul's scream is so shrill it makes Katsuki's ears ring. The villain seems like his brain has

stopped computing. In his defense, he's watching a dead guy walk right now. Too bad this dead guy hates his guts and wants to do quite the opposite of defending him.

"You hate quirks, yeah? 'They're a plague and a sickness.' Your words, not mine. You want to destroy them and you want me to help you, yeah? That's what you said. So *let me fucking help you.*" And he rips another piece off. This time, there's not enough aura to compensate. The burn is so stinging he's forced to sever the connection for a moment, and he sees how Overhaul's eyes have been glued to the brat this whole time, as if he wants something from her.

"Get the fuck out of here kid, I meant what I said," he orders as he bashes Overhaul's head into the floor. The brief respite from the aura connection has allowed purple collar a chance to get a finger of his left hand onto a few pieced of rubble near him, and Katsuki ducks to dodge the spear they turn into.

His words seem to have snapped the girl out of her stupor, because she crawls desperately off the bed and runs to the door. She pulls a card Katsuki hadn't known she had from inside her dress and slides it into the scanner. The door pops open.

"Eri, stop this instant!" calls Overhaul, and Katsuki bashes him into the floor again, kicking him in various places.

The brat hesitates for a moment, likely a habitual reaction to this bitch's voice, and damn if that doesn't make Katsuki angrier but she grabs the handle of the exit with a shaky hand, pulls it open, and slips away, letting the heavy door close with a thud.

Overhaul's very being deflates, quirk factor and all, and he turns to face Katsuki with an expression of mixed rage and terror. Katsuki sees his eyes shift, his arm move, and he knows what he's gonna do.

no wonder the League wants you. you're a fucking freak

Right as the bastard's fingers come into contact with the hole in Katsuki's chest, Katsuki's own fingers grip his quirk factor. The villain's entire body shudders as he begins to shake, and when he tries to activate his quirk, Katsuki tears the rest of the solidified mud-colored aura to shreds, ripping large chunks of it off and flinging them away to disintegrate.

whatever you do to quirks makes people feel like shit. do you fucking molest people

Katsuki's mind is one track. *Get rid of the aura*, it seems to scream at him. Even as the tips of his fingers start to somehow bleed and Overhaul makes every noise of distress humanly possible, banging his hands against the floor —shifting unstably due to his quirk. Even as every movement he makes feels all the more repulsive, he doesn't stop tearing that aura apart. Under all the blood, his fingers are turning blue.

his entire left leg up and explodes in a spray of blood and muscle and atomized clothing

At one point the lights of the room give with a sad flicker, and instead of impairing him, the darkness serves as a guide, because auras still let off their own light, which means that Overhaul's muddy mess of a target is as good as highlighted, while Katsuki's own blood (that's managed to land itself in some crazy ass places —how the hell did it get on the ceiling—?) makes for orange-tinted mood lighting.

I wasn't lying when I said I'd pick you apart.

He's not sure how long it goes on for, or when exactly all the screaming goes from viscerally satisfying to unbearable to listen to. Right turns into wrong, and he's thinking about hero ethics class again. Back then Katsuki had scoffed at the thought that hurting people who deserved it could make you feel bad… now Katsuki (who has a little more… experience and finds the concepts of violence and murder far more tangible) can't help but be sick of himself. Can't help but start feeling like the involuntary endorphin-fueled satisfaction of every scream he draws out is a celebration of him being a horrible person.

why do you keep causing trouble?! How the fuck are you going to fix this?! Katsuki, what the fuck is wrong with you?!

Overhaul's last-ditch effort is using his quirk on the literal air, gathering a projectile of dust the size of a tank bullet. But Katsuki's ripped away the last of his quirk energy before he can shoot it, so it puffs apart into nothing without fulfilling its purpose.

Purple collar goes slack, eyes unseeing, and any bits of his aura that had been scattered around the room before disintegrate, burying his quirk forever.

you have to be wrong in the head since birth to end up a bully at such a young age. no Katsuki, you were never meant to be anything but a villain.

It’s only then that the sudden silence makes the haze over Katsuki’s eyes clear, and he sees someone pathetic and bruised and beaten instead of the guy who tortured him without remorse. There are blood and organ bits everywhere, the room smells of iron and decay. His skin seems about a dozen shades paler even under the low light of his blood and yeah, he doesn’t need to look at the hole in his chest to remember that he’s very dead.

“…I fucked it up like you said you always knew I would.” He finds himself saying out loud, to no one in particular. He snakes a dirty hand into his hair and pulls, as if anything could possibly hurt more right now, physically or mentally.

That goes way beyond any realm of self-defense. His eyes fall onto the lump of defeated aura-less human that is Overhaul and they immediately flinch away. They sting. His face feels wet. *I fucking tortured him.*

He’s still the same as he’s always been.

And I can't even die to make up for it.

At a loss for what else to do, Katsuki scours the room for some sort of thing that will serve as medical assistance. The walk-in closet, as it turns out, is more like a walk-in medical supply room. As he drags Overhaul to the closet and looks him over despite every instinct telling him to get the hell away Katsuki chants *he deserved it all I did was take his quirk away he deserved it he deserved it* in his head in a poor attempt at self-solace. Overhaul still has a pulse, and he’s still breathing fine. He looks bloody but they’re all surface-level nicks, technically it was his aura that Katsuki targeted and that exists in a whole different plain. A little wiping with disinfectant and a lot of bandaging and he’ll make it.

Bit by bit, as he's wiping the exposed bits of Overhaul's skin down, Katsuki’s vision becomes so blurred he sees blobs more than things, his hands are a mess of toxic orange-crimson contrasting pale, deathly, blue-streaked gray. The tears at the corners of his eyes drip down to his chin and only get replaced by more and more and more, they won’t fucking stop. Do dead people cry? Katsuki doesn’t feel like that should be possible.

And yet snot gathers in his tingling nose and he sucks in air and it makes him croak and hiccup. He brings the edges of his soiled palms to wipe away all the wetness covering his eyes but for some

godforsaken reason, the action only makes him cry harder, and he hears with a horrified swoop of his stomach the sound of his own sob bouncing back and forth in the small closet. What is he *doing*?

His shoulders shake and he gets away from him (who should be fine or well, as fine as possible, now. He's banged up but he's not bleeding out anymore.) and after grabbing the first armful of supplies he comes across, crawls outside, leaning against the wall and breathing hard even though the air isn't going fucking anywhere and the only thing the action accomplishes is send a jolt of blinding pain to his every nerve end. He wants to lurch badly but he's fairly sure a chunk of his esophagus is gone, and he doesn't feel like adding leaky stomach acid to today's too-long list of bullcrap.

So Katsuki can still use his body after it dies because of course, he can't just die. Of fucking course. Fuck him backward. The entire place reeks, of fake sugar and death and bullshit. He stares at his hands again through blurry eyes. How long till he starts decomposing? What's his consciousness going to do then? Turn into fucking dirt?

There's no way his circulatory system is working, so why is his brain functioning without oxygen to fuel it? His lungs are better than most, yeah but they aren't gonna do shit if there's a big ass hole through them. None of this makes any sense. Not even a little bit.

This is how he survived the lab escape, he realizes. He *didn't* survive. But back then his biggest injury had been the gut stab. Now… Koharu can't defibrillate a heart back to life if it's not fucking there anymore.

He curls in on himself, feeling the blood draining out of him, making his clothes sticky, feeling the constant suffocation because he has no goddamn lungs, feeling his stupid waterworks for eyes and the stupid ghost tingles of an aura getting torn apart and a sob rips itself from his throat again and again and again. He wants everything to stop.

Eri has no idea what's going on.

In hindsight, it might have been a bad decision to try and run away again after how much trouble she got into the first time. But last time she'd also gotten so close, she'd seen people from outside and they'd noticed she needed help and the green boy held her like she hadn't been held since papa disappeared and she was *tired*. She was sick of Chisaki. She never wanted to see him again.

But things weren't that simple. She'd gotten caught and she knew that

Chisaki would show up and teach her a lesson. She'd hoped that maybe if she hid under enough blankets he wouldn't be able to find her. It's like that that the boy showed up to her room, dressed in a pair of stained blue scrubs.

Eri is quite familiar with fear. Since her mama left and Chisaki took her in, that's about all her life has been. And today has been extra scary. She'd assumed the blonde boy was one of Chisaki's helpers, but they started fighting the moment Chisaki showed up, so clearly that was not the case. Like any other person who didn't fit in Chisaki's puzzle, the boy turned into a splat of blood before he could even lay a hand on her captor. And Eri could do nothing but watch.

She feels herself shaking as she listens to Chisaki's scolding on the destructiveness of her power, but the only thing she can pay attention to is the blood on his sleeves and the blond boy, who Chisaki says is dead, who should be dead because Chisaki did that spike move to Eri's fifth handler and they died, and who is very much alive and wiggling on the spike piercing his chest.

Some part of her whispers that none of this would have happened had she not thrown a wrench in Chisaki's plans and tried to run away again, hung up on the feeling of hope from the green boy's hug. The two of them would have left earlier and Chisaki would have never found whoever this blond is in Eri's room, might have never killed him (But he's not dead, is he? Eri can see him walking).

"No one out there wants you. The only one who can keep you under control is *me*. So unless you want to end up like that—"

Chisaki turns to come face to face with the blonde and as she'd thought, the boy is not meant to be alive.

"Let's hear the end of that sentence, yeah?"

Eri is scared of Chisaki and Chisaki is terrified of this mystery person, so that means Eri should be scared of him too, right?

They start fighting again and this time the boy seems to have the advantage. The only word Eri could use to describe the scuffle is disgusting. She has no idea who is doing what, but the boy is clutching at the air with weird motions and it's making Chisaki scream like he's being eaten by one of the monsters mama used to tell her lived under the beds of naughty kids.

"You have no idea how badly I wish I could rip your arms off." Eri

flinches. She doesn't know who she's supposed to be rooting for.

"Hey brat, don't listen to anything this bitch said, okay? You didn't do shit. Run along out that door and don't let any other bastards catch you. Hide in a corner and close your eyes or something—" He's not blaming her? He's telling her to get out? To get to safety? "I'm going to fucking murder this guy." *Oh.*

But he doesn't understand. Chisaki is too strong. Eri has seen him explode people with a touch. The blond boy already lost once. Blond boy should be dead. Then why is he telling Eri to run? Why does he sound so confident beneath that anger? Why does Chisaki believe him?

Eri is frozen as the boy makes good on his claim, doing more of those weird arm movements. Chisaki sounds like he's being flayed alive, and the shrillness of his voice, unlike what she's ever heard, rings in her ears.

"You hate quirks, yeah? 'They're a plague and a sickness.' Your words, not mine. You want to destroy them and you want me to help you, yeah? That's what you said. So *let me fucking help you.*"

She needs to get out of here. But Chisaki's gaze on her feels heavy, and she can't bring herself to look at him. She can't bring herself to move either.

"Get the fuck out of here kid, I meant what I said," she startles at being addressed, and the order is punctuated by the crack of Chisaki's head against her tiled floor. It clicks into place then, he's trying to save her. Trying to keep Chisaki still (or maybe holding back on him) so she can escape. And if she doesn't run now, if she's not brave now, it will all be for nothing. So she leaps up and sprints towards the door, whose heavy steel she always hesitates to open, and fumbles for the keycard she stole off her handler from the pockets of her dress. She swipes it through the scanner and hears the door pop.

"Eri, stop this instant!" She stills, a shock of horror going through her system, disbelief that she's even thinking of defying Chisaki again. But when she looks the blond boy is pinning him down, and she decides then that she needs to get out, for her sake and his. She shifts the door open just enough to slip out, then tugs it closed with a thud.

Her heart hammers in her chest as she collapses against the closed door, breathing hard. She did it.

Now, what had the boy said? *Run along out that door and don't let any bastards catch you?* He's right. If any of Chisaki's helpers show up, it'll be over for her. She'll get caught and trapped again. If she's going to run, she'll have to do it *now*.

The world is not on her side however, because the moment she reaches the end of the hall, where the paths split off, the entire building shakes and the lights sputter and turn off, plunging the area into darkness. In that dark crossroad, a cool draft blows through the hall, and the building shakes again, making sprinkles of dust and shavings of chipped paint rain from the ceiling. Without a light to guide her, she'll get lost. She knows the route to get out, but she doesn't know it well enough to follow it alone when she can't see.

She'll have to stay put until the lights come back on. So Eri runs back to the corner of the hall with her room in it and collapses against it, drawing her knees close to her chest and playing with the bandages at her ankles. Her room is soundproof, so she doesn't know what's going on inside. There's no light seeping through from the cracks in the door —the power must've gone out in there too.

Eri has spent most of her life in this basement. Apart from a few flashy recollections of her mama and papa's house, these cold walls and grey floors are all she remembers. And among all those memories, nothing like this has ever happened.

The dark makes her nervous, the lack of noise even more so. She counts the drips of a leaky pipe. She counts her own inhales and exhales. She's never had a proper sense of time, with being stuck down here for who knows how long. Those stretches of pitch-black silence feel to go on forever.

She's not sure why she does it, but she feels the wall for the door to her room, to be specific, the cracks where it connects to its hinges and puts her ear up against them in an effort to hear what's going on inside. It's not just how cold the metal is against her ear that makes her pull back, but rather the still shrill screaming that catches on it, and she knows, that Chisaki isn't going to win this one.

She waits longer. She waits until she's counted ten sets of ten slow breaths ten times with her fingers to help her out, because that's as high as she can count. Then, she presses her ear against the crack of the door again. This time, she hears crying —and it's not Chisaki's. Eri recoils, feeling as though she's intruding on a private moment. She breathes in again. Ten more counts of ten breaths. The third time she

listens in, the only thing that greets her is silence.

Whatever happened in there, it's over. Ten more counts of ten. Nothing changes. The building still shakes, everything is still dark, no one comes out of her room. Eri's horn aches, and when she reaches up to touch it, she finds it bigger than it's been in a while.

Eri remembers the hole in the blond boy's chest, the dead pallor of his skin, how Chisaki had insisted he *was* dead. There's no way that boy will live for long, even if he won against Chisaki. And if he dies after going to such lengths to keep Chisaki away from her, when Eri has the power to heal him, then Eri will never be able to forgive herself.

Eri can't make it out of the basement on her own either. If the boy is both someone like her and someone strong enough to beat Chisaki, and she rewinds his time and gets rid of his wound, he might agree to help her escape.

Be brave, she tells herself as she takes out her keycard again and swipes it on the door, popping it open. Inside, it's as dark as the hall, and the usual perfume of sugar candy her handler sprays every evening is tinted with something suffocating. Small debris and shards of rubble dig into her bare feet, and something she steps on makes a wet noise. She can't see a thing and she's got no idea what is where so she stumbles blindly towards what she thinks is her chest of drawers. All her nightlights have fallen to the floor, and she pats it until she finds one that's intact. It's sphere-shaped.

The button to turn it on is on the bottom of it, and when she presses it the sudden yellow-toned glow makes her flinch. With one nightlight on she manages to locate three more, two of which work. Now that she has light she scans the room for the boy, and finds him leaned against a bit of the wall that's still smooth.

His eyes are open but he doesn't seem to have noticed any of what she's been doing. There are tears dripping down his chin and a huge puddle of liquid around him. Thanks to the low lighting, Eri can pretend it's anything but blood. He looks dead and she'd probably think he was dead, were it not for the soft rhythmic fidgeting of his leg.

"I—"

"What are ya still doing here?" She stiffens. His eyes seem to glow under the light of the lamps in Eri's arms. Even though they're a lighter color, they're red, like hers. He's looking straight at her, but at

the same time through her —It half feels like he can't see anything at all. She drops what she's holding and inches closer.

"I couldn't see. No light," she says, and he sighs like her third handler used to sigh when Eri picked at her bandages after being told not to. "Of course there fucking isn't," he mutters, deflating further. Eri isn't sure if what she said made him angry, so she stops coming closer.

"Um… sir? are you okay?"

He scoffs. It takes far too long for him to answer. When he does, the bright inflections of his voice from before Chisaki showed up are drowned out—seem to have disappeared. "Do I look okay to ya?" They stare at each other for a moment. He makes an ugly face the whole time, wrought with fatigue.

"What happened to C—Chisaki?"

"The fuck is Chisaki?"

Is that a question? She takes it for a question. "That bad man you were fighting."

"Oh him. I..." He inhales. "I got rid of him." More silence. (Chisaki is *gone?* Eri can't quite process that.) Another inhale, this one wetter. "So take your nightlight and run up and out of here. Go play with flowers or whatever brats do. You don't need to look at me like that."

Oh no. Did she ruin it? "I'm s-sorry," she squeaks, shutting her eyes and covering her head on instinct. Nothing happens. She blinks one eye open and he's frowning at her.

"Kid, you're like five, and about the least threatening thing I've come across in the last five months. I ain't gonna hurt you...What did that fucker do to ya?"

"Fu—fucker?" she repeats, unfamiliar with the word. She swears it makes the haze in his eyes grow a bit clearer, the corners of his mouth upturn a little, though the blood on his lips is kind of frightening.

"That guy, bird asshole, purple collar, Overhaul…" He waves his hand around. The way it moves is floppy, uncareful. There's a bit of it missing. It's bleeding too. It would be harder to find a spot on him that isn't.

"You mean C—Chisaki, sir?" He makes another face but nods. "He—

um—" She doesn't really want to talk about this, or remember, so she settles on: "He puts me in a lab sometimes… for my quirk."

"You too huh," says blond boy, a somber, bone-tired sympathy in his tone that strikes something in Eri. Somehow, she feels he *gets it*. Did Chisaki put him in a lab too—? "You're a fucking toddler. What the hell. That bitch deserved every bit of that beating." He was the one she heard crying. He's still crying. Eri doesn't think he's noticed there are tears running down his face at all. The boy is not so bad, she thinks. His face is scary and his strength is scary, but he said he wouldn't hurt her, and if she gets him to help, they might be able to get out of this basement for good.

"Thank you for saving me, sir," she starts, making to step closer to him, but his bristling makes her stop. She opens her mouth to speak right when another tremor shakes the building and she loses balance, nearly tripping into the puddle of blood. "Serious Déjà vu," mutters the boy as the lights flicker on and back off for a moment.

"We have to get out of here, sir," she says, "Chisaki's helpers might come."

"No shit, but I'm kind of a corpse. Worms and bacteria are gonna start eating me up soon. Not of much use, in case you're wondering." He laughs an empty laugh, one without humor.

Eri bites her lip, considering. Her quirk… it's dangerous and evil. If she messes this up, the boy might disappear like papa. Her hands tremble. But he says he's going to die in a bit either way and there's a chance, that Eri will do this right and save him. Be a hero, like the green boy from the alley. Like the blond boy in front of her. The ground trembles. She clenches her fists, mind made.

"Sir—"

"My name's Katsuki," he interrupts, "You don't need to do that 'sir' crap."

"Sir Ka—ka—kachuki," she tries frowning as the syllables refuse to roll down her tongue, too afraid to meet his eyes in case he's angered by her incompetence.

The boy simply sighs again. "Say Kacchan. That's… fine too. And for fuck's sake, drop the sir."

Eri brightens, relaxing at the lack of scolding. "Kacchan," she starts

again, drawing nearer, “I can use my— my quirk to fix you! It can make living things go b-back to how they were before.”

His eyes widen. “That’s some overpowered bullshit… you can’t control it can you?”

She shakes her head in defeat. “No… Chisaki said I could never use it without him there, since I’m m-made to d-destroy.”

Blond boy is silent for a long moment, Eri winces, prepared for his rejection. It never comes. “Chisaki’s also a dumb pile of gaudy trash, don’t take anything that comes out of his mouth serious. You’re what… five?”

“Six,” she supplies, holding up six shaking fingers.

“Same difference. That’s little kid age, kid, you ain’t supposed to be good at controlling your quirk yet.” He looks down at the hole Eri has been trying her very best to avoid staring at. His frown is severe. The light catches on the tear tracks on his cheeks. He exhales. “Not like I got much to lose. Do your worst brat.”

Alright! Now it’s onto part two of her plan. “But—” she says, cringing at the wobble in her voice, “—you have to promise to help me get out.”

This time the upturn of his mouth is much more than a trick of the light. “Shit, are you trying to bargain with me?” His voice has broken out of the previous monotone, if only a little.

“Um… uh…” She doesn’t know how to tell him she has no idea what “bargain” means.

“I wasn’t gonna leave you down here, either way, you know,” he says, and it sounds like a scolding, but his delivery is so light it’s not making her tense.

“But you need to promise,” she insists. Her papa would always promise. It’s one of the few things she remembers of him.

“I’m not a good guy. I’m not a hero either, and I can’t sing lullabies for shit,” he warns her. It isn’t like Eri couldn’t tell. The heroes in her storybooks never look like this, much less make people scream like blond boy does.

“That’s o-okay as long as you promise.”

“I promise I’ll try my best to get us out of here.”

The statement is reassuring, but Eri is not done. She holds out a hand, twisting it so only her pinky sticks out. “P-pinky promise or it doesn’t count.”

“Hah... What the fuck even is my life anymore,” Kacchan mutters under his breath, but he wipes his hand with the least blood on it on an unsoiled part of his pants and holds out his own pinky. Eri reaches out, hooking them together. His hand is rough, a lot bigger than hers and colder too —she can feel the difference with her own body temperature

“Promise?” she asks again.

“Promise.”

Satisfied, Eri pulls her hand away and feels her horn tingle.

“Now do your worst.”

What she’s about to try dawns on her, and the hesitation she thought she’d gotten over peeks out from its hiding place. “Are you— are you sure, Kacchan?”

“I agreed didn’t I?” he snaps, “So hurry up before some bitch bootlicker shows up.” She doesn't let him know this is her first time hearing the word 'bootlicker', instead sitting down cross-legged in front of him. His skin is so blue from up close, he seems like a real corpse. Eri puts a trembling hand on his leg, and he pretends very hard he didn’t flinch. She tries to will her quirk to work, but the one time she wants it to activate it refuses to cooperate, some part of her that sounds suspiciously like Chisaki whispering about how she’s bound to mess this up.

“Relax brat— I’m already dead. There’s nothing you could do that would make this situation worse.” Eri takes his words to heart, finally letting her quirk go free. Kacchan’s skin shines and Eri watches as the hole in his chest stitches itself back together, the cuts all over him disappear, the blood matted into his hair goes poof, and the color drains back into his face too, leaving him looking better than he did even before Chisaki beat him the first time. Eri takes her hand away as fast as she can, even if her quirk seems to have deactivated itself. She goes to ask Kacchan if he’s okay, but the boy lets out a choked gasp before he’s turned to the side and started vomiting.

It takes a long time before he stops, and Eri is worried with every cough and heave, that she used her quirk wrong. “Kacchan?” she asks and he squints at her. “Y-you’re crying.” She’s not sure why she said that, because it makes him snarl at her in a scary way.

“Shut up,” he says even as he wipes tears with an angry hand, huffing. He seems to notice the way his anger made her tense, because when he speaks again it’s just a little bit gentler, quieter: “Sorry… And thanks, kid.”

Eri’s heart floods with a warmth she hasn’t felt ever since her papa disappeared. When Kacchan stands up, she goes to follow, but a stifling wave of nausea hits her and suddenly her head feels like it’s boiling. She collapses onto the floor and her quirk activates on nothing. She wills it to stop again, but it doesn’t work and it *hurts*.

Kacchan turns around to stare at her, wrinkling his nose at the mix of blood and vomit painting the floors, “What’s wrong?” he asks and Eri tries to answer but can’t through all the fuzz clouding her mind. She whimpers in pain, holding out her arms so they’re not touching anything. “Quirk overuse? Nah… it’s out of control,” mutters Kacchan, frowning at her and eyeing the space around her like there’s something there only he can see. He leaves Eri’s sight for a moment, and when he comes back he’s holding a pair of rubber gloves.

“Your quirk only works on living shit?”

She manages a nod.

“Any other rules?”

“Hands…”

“You need to be touching shit?” She nods again, and he holds out the gloves. They’re for her, she realizes. “Can you put these on by yourself? Gloves aren’t living.”

They’re far too big. If she bunches them together all five of her fingers could fit in only to of the fingers of the glove. Putting them on doesn’t make her quirk stop, but the knowledge that she’ll need to take them off to make anyone disappear is a small comfort. Kacchan has noticed her quirk hasn’t stopped, because he’s still squinting. Then he’s gulping and reaching out to touch the air around Eri’s horn.

When he hisses, Eri feels a sort of pressure in that area, even though he isn’t touching her. She looks up in confusion and he’s moving his

hands like he's smoothing something down, and whatever he's doing, it's making Eri's quirk slow until it stops. Her head though, still feels as if it's full of hot cotton.

"This is fine, everything is fine," she hears him mutter when her legs give out and she collapses against him. He flinches but he's so warm. So warm his temperature of before could be compared to ice. Like a furnace. He picks her up and places her on a pillow that's survived the destruction of the room. Then he leans over a pile of supplies and rummages for something. Eri has no idea what she's doing. Her bleary eyes look around the room, and they catch on the door of her closet, untarnished in the wall of spikes. There's something drawn on it that wasn't there before.

"What" *does it* "say?" she asks, looking straight at the closet.

"Can't read?"

"Nuh-uh."

"Too bad then." He doesn't elaborate. His pale hair is glowing from the nightlights. It's so similar yet different to hers. She lets out a whimper and squirms against the pillow, the heat in her head making it hard to breathe. "Shit. Got any injuries, kid?"

"What's 'injuries'?"

"Uh… anything that makes you go 'ouch'."

Her feet hurt, but it would be too much effort to explain. "Head feels… f—fuzz fuzz."

Kacchan groans. "Fucking fever…" The room shakes, making bits of ceiling tumble to the floor. Before she can blink, Kacchan has slapped something gummy against her forehead. It's cool, and nice, and eases the feeling of overheating. Then, he's grabbing her and with a "Hold on," propping her up on his back. She leans into him. She's feeling hot so it doesn't make sense that more heat would make her feel better, but feel better it does.

"You know the layout of this place? Or how to get out?"

"Mhm… I remember … way I took last time."

She's not sure how Kacchan does it, but he uses ripped fabrics from the covers of her bed to fix her to his back, and tells her to hold on to

what's left of his blue shirt. Then, he's giving her one of the nightlights, the smallest one, after turning it off. "Hold on to that. If we run into trouble I can't get out of, I'll let you off and you can run away."

"But it's off."

"I can see in the dark. Don't need that shit."

"That's c—cool Kacchan," she slurs. Were she more coherent, she'd be horrified at her own openness. But her head is still full of fuzzies. Kacchan stiffens and starts shuffling faster, picking up and stowing away more of the room's intact nick-nacks. The room shakes again, and they shift to avoid a few collapsing pieces of wood. "Got any idea what's causing this shaking crap?"

She doesn't answer. Kacchan answers himself.

"Of course ya don't. You're fucking six. What the fuck." He picks up the handle of one of her long lamps. It's solid and metal. He brandishes it around, nodding to himself.

"When we get out there, you're gonna have to be real quiet. Remember the route you took back then and just give me directions. No talking other than that. Got it?"

She's sleepy.

"Oi, got it?"

"Yea…"

"What other choice do ya have really," he mutters to himself. Then he's leaning down to shut off the other two nightlights and plunge the room into darkness. "Lead the way, kid."

Chapter End Notes

> the beautiful fan arts for this chapter. give them some love 1 2
> 1) this is actually katsuki's third death. his first was right after afo stabbed him. he was dead until he fought the nomu upstairs and electrocuted himself back to life. his second was in the phone booth where koharu found and revived him, and this is his third. I tried to leave clues for this in chapter 5. I wonder if they were things that you could pick up on. I know some people have come super close to guessing/have outright guessed that katsuki could

come back to life so props to you.

2) katsuki's exact situation and how this all works is not explained because katsuki doesn't know either and he's the limited POV character of this chapter. we're gonna learn more about it soon, just like the first time.

3) another minuscule easter egg, Noriko has mentioned this book called the spider silk chronicles in two of the chapters she's in. In that book, the MC Kinu gets speared by the villain and it turns out she can come back to life. That was meant to be minuscule foreshadowing I put in for the heck of it. I was almost tempted to tell people to look for it like the Fat Gum cousin thing. They're really small things so I never expect people to get them but they're so entertaining to set up.

4) to make up for all the angst today next chapter is borderline crack. the shaking eri and katsuki mention throughout this chapter is the heroes starting their raid upstairs. The blackout is also their fault. It's about to become a shitshow. Poor mirio is in for a very big surprise when he comes to eri's room.

5) katsuki is very not okay. very not okay at all.

6) I've seen people in the comments curious about why the league wants katsuki. There's three reasons. Also, in this fic, AFO can still somewhat communicate with the doctor and Tomura and the gang despite being in jail, so they do share information. The three reasons are: he's a dude with too much information he could leak; he somehow made AFO's quirk malfunction, therefore it's logical to assume he may be aware of some weakness of AFO's and is therefore dangerous to the League; and last, AFO has a vague inkling of the fact that Katsuki can come back to life. The reason AFO was so sure he killed Katsuki in the basement is because he did. AFO had ragdoll's quirk at the time, which Katsuki disappeared from, because for a brief moment, he was dead. He never reappeared on the radar when he came back to life because his DNA degrades a little and changes every time he dies and or interacts with auras (Tsukauchi says the DNA at the lab was a 100% match for the stuff on the walls, which bakugou put there before AFO showed up, and a 96% match for the puddle he left after getting stabbed). That's why the League wants him. Plus and they want their hands on whatever he can do to quirks.

7) Eri... she's a little different from canon I think. Ngl, writing a

six-year-old is hard, because I always struggle with what vocabulary to use for her inner narration without making it overly simplistic. Usually, I stick to my regular style for the narrative and simplified dialogue. That pinky-promise scene has been written since ages. Same for the Kacchan thing. I debated with myself a lot over what to have Eri call him and in the end, I decided on Kacchan as something more intimate than Katsuki that wouldn't sound cringy. If you're getting baby deku vibes that is in fact purposeful and set up to make Katsuki suffer now and in the future. Also her quirk, it's very wishy-washy in canon, and idek if it works only through her hands because it's never been specified, but for the purpose of this fic, it works the same way as Overhaul, i.e. she just needs to make contact with at least one finger with the living thing she wants to rewind.

8) I have so many ideas for Eri-Katsuki fluff you don't even know.

9) Writing a lot of this was painful because it's such a dark chapter and yet again I felt bad for bakugou. This boy cannot catch a break (I say this as I give him zero breaks). This is probably his rock bottom, honestly.
10) The parallels to Bakugou's first escape from the League are very purposeful.
11) Using the dark + katsuki's neon blood to set the mood was very fun.
12) I finally went through all the chapters to standardize the use of honorifics (I'm sticking to the proper Japanese ones within dialogue and none in narration) and fixed up a lot of the grammar in the dialogue of early chapters. I was cringing at all the bad punctuation lmaoo. I'm kind of embarrassed of the very first few chapters. Looking back on things there's a lot to improve. Maybe once I actually finish the fic, I'll one day go back and remaster it lol. I wonder if there's visible writing improvement across chapters

Chapter 18: How to run from (and accidentally explode) a Yakuza organization in 63 minutes, more or less

Chapter Summary

Katsuki runs around, bleeds all over the place, and commits more than a couple of crimes (??)

(jfc the violence in this. um. there are graphic descriptions of violence and injuries, gun violence, just very much violence. also self-harm but not in the usual context like katsuki uses his blood to do stuff)

Chapter Notes

heyoo

i've been swamped as of late been going out a lot with family and such early in the mornings so my sleep schedule is freshly fucked XD hope u friends have been doing okay!

bakugou's kind OP in this fic, I'm not even gonna lie. i can't help it, I like bamfs. and I feel like he suffers enough regardless to make up for it. he'll meet enemies that counteract his magic quirk bs soon, don't worry it just won't be right now XD he also gets both lucky and unlucky.

this chapter is crack. just all of it crack. for the tiny scenes with mirio and deku and aizawa, the context is pretty much the same as that of canon. i didn't want to rehash stuff a lot of u probably already know because I didn't want it to get repetitive so that's why I didn't go into detail on the hero side of the raid. what's important for the hero side is the aftermath *winks*

thank you so much for all ur comments and continued support

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There’s a draft blowing through the halls that wasn’t there before. It makes the skin showing through the many tears of his smock tingle, and offers a welcome respite from the smell of blood and innards, replacing it with stale air and powdered concrete. Katsuki breathes in, feels the edges of the hole torn in his shirt tickle his hole-less chest,

breathes out.

He came back to life, a couple of minutes ago. That's a thing he did. That's a thing he can apparently do.

Okay.

It had been difficult to notice while he'd been dead, but there's a difference between then and now. It's dark yet everything seems twice as vivid, the skin on his bones is so warm it almost feels foreign. It's like he went from watching a movie in black and white on a dingy box TV to starring in a top-rated feature film with box office earnings so ridiculous they could feed his non-existent family for three generations.

But, even though he's the star of the show, he's watching himself —an outsider in his own body. He's reminded of his dreams in the other basement, of the dreams Satsu wakes him from at home, of that sense of having lost control, of being a video game character who's started their cutscene.

He'd say this is all a dream too, but the pain everywhere, the neon his bare feet are trudging where they step, and the weight of the kid on his back, those are very much real.

She didn't rewind him too far —he'd wager a day at most. The half-healed, neat lines of cuts from Overhaul's experiments are still there, brighter than before. It's kind of eerie, how the glow of the blood waiting to pop out of them shows through his skin and makes him look like a glowstick.

Maybe he *is* a walking biohazard.

Under the light of the brat's golden aura, the world seems off-kilter.

"Kacchan?" Her voice spooks him, for a moment he'd forgotten where he was or what he was doing. "M'cold."

❖ sixty-two minutes ❖

Is it cold? He supposes it is. It's winter and the basement halls have neither heating nor sunlight —or any light at all for that matter. The kid has a fever, and that ratty dress she's wearing won't amount to much in the realm of temperature regulation. Katsuki can't tell if he himself is cold, and frankly, it would be a small addition irrelevant to his long list of problems. He could have hypothermia and he doesn't

think he could muster up the energy to give a fuck, right now.

Distantly, he considers that's not a good thing, but he doesn't care much about distant thoughts either.

The kid is a kid though, so Katsuki folds in half the thin blanket he nicked from her room and throws it around himself like a cape, covering her too. She sighs against his shoulder blade, hands holding on to the fabric of his shirt so tight it may tear, and Katsuki is struck by the thought that's he's very far out of his league.

He doesn't deal with kids. Point blank period. His old modus operandi, his personal policy so to speak, dictated no one got special treatment, so no coddling or goo goo ga ga language for brats. Whenever he'd see his mother coo at the babies and toddlers of coworkers, make that high-pitched, unbearable baby voice, he'd resist the urge to gag to save himself from a beating for being impolite. His mom had once told him he used to hate the baby voice even as a baby, would pout and babble and scream-cry until people talked to him like the normal fucking human he was and not a thing so stupid it couldn't understand speech without exaggerated, condescending inflections.

Pretentious little asshole.

Most kids aren't like that though, so Katsuki doesn't get along with most kids. They think he's rude and scary and villainous. Parents don't want their kids around him either. Memories from the dozen encounters with distraught mothers and too honest children from those days of limbo between expulsion and the League break free from the dusty mental drawer he's shoved them in, and Katsuki squishes them back down, slams the drawer shut, and pushes the entire dresser of expulsion limbo related memories off the mental cliff where it belongs.

This kid saved his life, so he owes her. That bitch Overhaul has had her for who knows how long, and Katsuki is not such a monster that he'll leave her here in this hellhole. Plus he promised. He pinky promised like a grade-schooler. Only a wuss breaks a pinky promise.

"Where are we supposed to go?"

"Out of the hallway —first." That's easy enough to do. The draft is stronger at the edge of the hall. A chill runs down Katsuki's spine. He waits for the kid's next instructions, but they never come. Her head is heavy against his shoulder.

“Hey, try not to fall asleep, kid,” he whispers, though it reverberates in the otherwise silent hall.

“Sorry,” she mumbles, and hell does she sound tired.

“Left. I remember big pipes on the wall”

That’s the direction where he heard those voices that forced him to duck into this hall and caused this mess in the first place. They’d better have left, for his sake and theirs.

❖ fifty-four minutes ❖

It’s been a short bit of walking when Katsuki hears footsteps for the first time. His own don’t make noise, so there’s someone else here. Katsuki tenses, stopping himself from even breathing as he keeps close to the concrete wall. An aura rounds the corner, bright in the pitch darkness. It’s blue and watery and belongs to Overhaul’s assistant with the truth quirk —Nemo or something.

Katsuki hates him.

His fingers twitch around the metal pole he’s been holding, his pulse thrums under his skin. Nemo moves through the hall haphazardly, is holding what seems to be a phone with its flash on. Looks like he didn’t have a flashlight. So the blackout isn’t purposeful? Through the wall Katsuki has pressed himself against, he can feel the vibrations of the building. The flash of Nemo’s phone is quite weak, illuminating nothing but the small area it’s directly pointed at.

Nemo is three meters away, drawing closer. The hall is wide, and they’re on opposite sides. Soon he’ll be right next to them, a hair’s breadth away. Katsuki feels woozy. He’d have the advantage in a fight but he’s not sure what he’d do, if he got the chance to punch someone right now.

It’s better if Nemo walks past the hall none the wiser. Once he’s passed, Katsuki will dash away in the other direction. He’d never even know they were here. A few more steps and they’ll be in the clear.

The kid sneezes.

It’s a tiny thing, muffled, *barely* there. Emphasis on the barely. *Damn it.*

“Who’s there?” says Nemo, immediately alert and pointing the phone

flash in every direction. Katsuki feels the kid jerk against his back, her breath hitching a little —she can't see in the dark like him, he remembers, all she sees right now is the faint glare of the flash. He curses as he contorts himself to avoid the flash, putting more distance between them and Nemo. Seconds tick by. Nemo has deemed the sound a trick of his ears, and he's gone back to moving forward.

That is until Katsuki's bare feet catch on a piece of rubble on the floor he hasn't been paying attention to and he falls forwards. He rights himself, but it's too late, the kid has already yelped, this time much louder.

"Eri, is that you?" *Oh fuck.* One wrong move now and they're toast. "What are you doing out here?! Show yourself!" To her credit, the kid keeps her mouth shut. Katsuki meanwhile is getting tired of playing cat and mouse with Nemo's phone flash. Nemo's patience soon runs out too, because he reaches into his pocket, pulls out a gun, and shoots.

Fucking hell.

The noise slices apart the silence. It's so loud it makes Katsuki's ears ring. The bullet misses by an arms-length, cutting into the concrete like it's clay. Right away Nemo reloads and shoots again, on the side of the hall next to where he shot the first time— the side where Katsuki is. Katsuki jumps back to avoid it. Is he seriously willing to shoot the kid willy nilly like this?

Two more shots ricochet off the sides of the walls, clattering onto the floor. The fifth one Katsuki can't avoid, it embeds itself into his calf with a swiftness he struggles to register, a flash of hot white pain then an all-encompassing, flaming buzz. He bit his tongue so hard to stop from yelling out he can taste copper on the roof of his mouth. He's lucky he's immune to the effects of his own nitroglycerin because he might've fainted right then and there.

The world gets even brighter. His heartbeat quickens, everything sharpens. When Nemo shoots again, his instincts react so fast the bullet misses him by the length of a full hand.

The pain almost feels good.

"Where are you?!" Nemo demands, frustration lacing his tone. He knows someone is there now, considering the bullet that hit Katsuki made an entirely different noise to the bullets that hit the concrete prior.

His question is accompanied by a thickening of the air, and while Katsuki keeps his lips pinched shut and falls a little further at the shit memories the burn on his face dredges up, the kid who can't resist quirks like he can, says out loud, "I can't see," then whimpers as apologies tumble out of her mouth.

"Stay there," Nemo instructs, then reaches into his pocket to, Katsuki assumes, reload his gun with a new clip. Katsuki jumps on the chance, crouching down and crawling closer to hit Nemo square in the crotch. Nemo yelps and drops his phone, swearing from the pain. He shoots in the direction he felt the hit come from, but Katsuki is long gone, so another bullet is wasted, swallowed up by the concrete. Katsuki grabs Nemo's ankle and drags it up off the floor, making the villain tumble over. The fabric of his robe thing is thick and scratchy. When Katsuki bashes it against the back of Nemo's head, the metal pole he's had in his hand the whole time makes a fun noise —something between a thump and a thud.

"Wh—"

"I'm having a very bad day, so shut the hell up." Katsuki hits him again. The beak bit of his mask has gone crooked.

"How are *you* here?! Where's the young boss?!" Nemo is so out of it he doesn't even use his quirk.

"He's… great. Amazing. A little red. Chilling in a closet," Katsuki says.

"What does that mea—"

Another whack. Eri yelps. "Look, I don't give a single fuck about you or your love affair with Overhaul. Tell me what's with this blackout and the shaking building and I'll think about letting you go suck Overhaul's ass or whatever."

"Tell me where he is—"

"Shooting isn't how you ask for a favor."

"Where is—" The air thickens and Katsuki sees red.

"Yeah, fuck this." Katsuki hits him so hard the crack echoes. The metal pole is a little bent. Nemo's body goes limp.

Heh, that was so easy, what if he died.

The thought is hysterical in every sense of the word. He's not sure if he wants to laugh or cry or cease existing.

Maybe I do need the shrink.

Katsuki hops off and after shoving Nemo's handgun into his makeshift utility belt, goes to take off Nemo's mask so he can stop him from talking and using his pesky ass quirk. As he's unhooking the clasps from each leather strap, an idea comes to him. He shuffles faster, and along with the mask, takes everything else off him too, leaving the villain in his underwear. It's kinda disgusting— he looks like a regular-ass salaryman without his villain costume and that's making Katsuki nauseous, so he drags Nemo over to the first door he finds in the hall that will unlock with one of his keycards, kicks him inside (the room seems not unlike the cell room he started this journey from), and waits to hear the lock click shut.

There. No more Nemo. No more guilt.

He limps along his trail of neon bloodied footsteps to find the pile of shit he took off Nemo.

It's kind of like he's in a video game. Traveling through the dungeon, beating the bosses, looting their items. He even respawns. His life is one big joke.

Aside from the clothes, both villain outfit and a woolen sweater Nemo had been wearing underneath, Nemo's pockets are full of crap. A half pack of cigarettes, a cloth for wiping glasses, a lighter, a book of checks, a pairing knife, two clips of regular bullets, spearmint gum, a ballpoint pen with a bent cap, a dozen ten thousand yen bills, keys, and keycards for days. It— most of it— is the sort of shit a normal person has in their pockets, and thinking of Nemo as a normal person makes Katsuki intensely uncomfortable. He takes the stuff that looks like it might be useful and turns back to the clothes.

Nemo's cape is gaudy and pilled but the fabric is nice, much thicker than that of Katsuki's torn smock. And the outfit betrays nothing of the features belonging to the person inside. The voice is a giveaway, but as long as he doesn't talk, he might be able to waltz out of here undisturbed.

"What are we doing?" asks the kid when Katsuki unties her from his back to put on the villain outfit. He's getting ready to change pants when the obvious problem presents itself. His calf is a fountain of neon. Because he got fucking shot and the bullet is still in there. The

edges of the wound are congealed, while the bleeding center is sticky, smells both like iron and pungent sugar. It's a bad thing that he can feel it very little, he knows, an unhealthy mix of too much adrenaline and mental detachment, but it *is* convenient.

He shreds up the smock he took off to make bandages and wraps them around his leg in six layers, hoping it will at the very least stop the blood loss. Not that it matters, since he can't die anyway, but it's always better if he's not leaking all over the floors.

Once finished with his first aid so sloppy Koharu would have a heart attack over it, he goes back to playing dress-up. Nemo's clothes stink of coffee and newspapers and gunpowder —he has to roll and pinch up the pants at the waistband so they don't slide off him, and the boots are a number or so too big, but it's manageable. It'll do. Warmer than his other outfit, that's for sure. He's extra careful with the injured leg.

The mask bit almost makes him change his mind, hating every moment of contact and every centimeter of restricting fabric, but he pulls through, clasping the thing over his face and putting on the hat. At least the ensemble doesn't have gloves.

The back of the white headpiece was stained, likely with blood from where Katsuki bashed Nemo. Katsuki hopes the hat that comes with the costume will cover it, and that Nemo won't die from brain hemorrhaging, that too. A bit of brain damage is passable, right? An eye for an eye but it's a bullet hole for a concussion? How many crimes is this now? When he gets home he'll sit down and count.

He's paranoid about leaving the kid on her own for long, even if she's too tired to do anything but stay put, so, after failing at putting her anywhere else, he ties her to his back again and covers her with the blanket.

"Keep your hands around my shoulders. I'll tap ya when you need to be quiet."

He feels her nod. "What… you do?"

"Changed outfits," he explains. "Fewer chances of mobsters being annoying."

"Oh." She's still burning up. With the new cape and the blanket and her, it's almost too warm for Katsuki. "He's scary. Did you kill him?"

Fuck is that weird to hear from a six-year-old. Then again, she'd been right there when Overhaul gutted him, and then she'd had no problem talking to him like his organs weren't falling out of a plate-sized hole. She's fucking *six* and she's this desensitized. Katsuki has never given a shit about what's age-appropriate for kids because he's never given a shit about kids in general, but he finds himself thinking none of this is age-appropriate for kids regardless. This is fucked.

"Dunno. Hope not," Katsuki says as he's leaning down to pick up the phone. It had fallen face down. The glare of the screen makes him flinch. He turns off the flash and unlocks it easily enough —the lock is facial recognition based and it will apparently pick up even Nemo's mask. After removing any sort of password or security from the phone altogether, Katsuki scrolls as he walks.

It's a mid-range phone. Looks to be a little dated, no screen protector, and scuffed up at the edges. The glass back has cracked into a spiderweb from the bad fall.

It's Monday, 08:32, five days since he got here, the screen saver informs.

There are no games or social media apps, but there are a lot of calls and emails, and text conversations on *Telegram*. The contacts are different, sometimes regular names, sometimes pseudonyms or code names, sometimes just titles, like "chief" or "director". It's surreal to find a contact labeled Floten —that's—was flower head's tacky code name. The conversation goes like *special delivery at bay, 59:11 >> okay*.

These are the people the Hassaikai deals with. All the conversations on the phone are vague —not even these bitches are dumb enough to text incriminating things— but it's obvious to anyone with half a brain they're referring to shady business.

On impulse alone, Katsuki drafts up an email as he walks the halls.

You're a sucker and I hated working with you. Overhaul-sama told me to warn you he thinks you're an idiot who deserves to be put six feet under. He never wants to work with you again, and thinks you're such a speck of filth compared to him you should go fuck yourself. I hope you have a horrible day. Thank you for your attention.

He makes it a mass mail and adds every address that will pop up on the search bar to the mailing list. Then he presses send and watches the status go from sent to received. Nemo has mobile data, how nice.

The fancier names Katsuki drafts up personal text messages for. A simple *fuck you*.

Then a select few, he writes bullshit stories to. “The police are snooping, burn all your money, there will be raids tomorrow.” and “Donate earnings from last deal to local emergency aid center —we’ve got an arrangement to get it cleaned” (there is no such thing) and “Buy Overhaul-sama fifty packs of diapers and have them delivered by next week or you might find your legs missing.”

Yakuza work on rep and fear and connections. Nuke those and you’ve nuked the Yakuza.

As he texts “I hope someone pisses in your food :)” to a contact labeled “general attorney” he thinks this may be the pettiest thing he’s ever done.

❖ forty-one minutes❖

The building shaking snaps him out of it. He puts the phone on silent and stuffs it in the pockets of his newly acquired cape, refocusing on the matter at hand. He’s reached a crossroad. A leaking pipe has formed a puddle of water on the ground. “Where to now?” he asks the kid.

Her reply is muffled and sleep-hoarse. “I— I don’t know,” she says it like she’s the one who made the mistake, but really it’s Katsuki’s fault —he’s the one who’s been wasting time and being childish while expecting her to remember her way around in the dark and with a fever of who knows how many degrees.

“Nah, it’s fine,” he whispers, picking up his pace. The more he walks, the less prominent the shaking seems to become. “Describe the place that has the last door for me?”

She does, speaking softly.

They keep walking. None of these paths seem familiar, and they don’t have any neon footsteps or drips on them besides the ones he’s making fresh, which means he’s never stepped on here before.

❖ thirty-six minutes ❖

The second person comes through the wall. Not from an entranceway, not from a door, literally through the wall. He’s walking perpendicular to the two of them. Stops in the hall. Looks left, looks right. Doesn’t

seem to have any type of flashlight or torch on him. As Katsuki pauses, he taps Eri's hand and she freezes statue still, holding her breath. The wall walker is a dude —tall and muscled as hell, dressed nothing like a Yakuza, all skintight suit and billowing cape. His aura is bright, murky when it's in standby and translucent when he'd been fazing through shit.

Katsuki gets a look at his face and it's fucking tin-tin, the resemblance is uncanny. Tin-tin sniffs the air, having caught a whiff of something, maybe them.

His outfit doesn't scream Yakuza, no, it screams hero. Not one Katsuki recognizes, but a hero nonetheless. Katsuki had been bluffing when he sent texts about raids to some of the contacts on Nemo's phone, but what if there *is* a hero raid going on? What if someone *has* shown up to rescue the brat?

If that's the case, should Katsuki just walk up to him and hand her over?

Promise?

Promise.

She's gone so still Katsuki could forget she was ever there. She trusts him way too much if she's listening to his instructions with this much care. Nah. He can't hand her over. He promised they'd get out together, and he can't go with the heroes because they hate him and he's dead and he'd rather not go to jail. It's a boiling pot of selfish reasons. Plus, he's got no idea who tin-tin is —this ain't a hero Katsuki knows or trusts. Maybe it's a Yakuza in disguise, god knows anything is possible. Maybe if he'd come across someone he knew, like Deku or Kirishima or something, he might think about having them take her, but this guy? Katsuki doesn't trust his cartoon-looking ass.

Katsuki waits until tin-tin has phased himself through the wall and disappeared, taps the brat to let her know she can relax and goes back to running.

❖ twenty-nine minutes ❖

There's the distant rumbling hum of a generator and the lights come back on, stuttering and cool-toned. They're giving Katsuki a headache. With his advantage of darkness eliminated, he feels exposed under the strip LEDs. There is one positive to this though. "One more right from this hall and the stairs start," says the brat, alerted by the sudden

lighting change. The closer he gets to where he's going the more he can feel the draft. It might be real or it might be a placebo, that doesn't matter, because they're on the right track. That's good. So good.

Almost too good to be true.

The halls of the basement have been so empty it's laughable, and while there hadn't been many yakuza in the halls during the trips from cell to dentist room and from cell to the toilet he remembers, it hadn't been a total wasteland like it is now. It feels like everyone has been called away, like these sections of the basement have been partitioned off and cleaned of everything. He should be grateful for the lack of people and threats to deal with, but at this point, all it does is make him suspicious. What's going on here that he's missing?

Whatever. He takes that left the brat told him to and is met with a wall flanked by two plain doors. Concrete and grey like every damn wall in this place. A dead end.

"What…?" mumbles the brat, shocked at the lack of a promised stairwell.

"You remember wrong?"

"I— no— I know it's here. The pipes are the same. The doors… same. Hallway too."

Katsuki frowns. "No stairs here though." And here he'd thought things were going well.

"I know it's here…" the kid insists, so Katsuki gets closer to the wall that's not supposed to be there and raps his knuckles against it. Then he does the same with the wall a few meters down, one that the brat remembers. The sound is different. Whatever's behind the not-meant-to-be-there wall, it's hollow. Maybe it's that simple. Maybe the wall was overhauled into place as a temporary block for this exit after the brat found it the first time.

That means all they have to do is break through.

Even though his blood is yet to soak through his pant leg, Katsuki can't kick for shit still, so knocking down the wall —no matter how thin— with any bit of his body would be near impossible. He digs into his pockets. He can't shoot the wall, the little knife will bend in half before it does shit to concrete, and the stuff can't be lit on fire either.

If only he could blow it up…

What happens when I slip and ignite all the biohazardous blood you graciously spread around the room and you go boom so bad they won't even find your ashes—?

Katsuki takes out the knife and slices into his own forearm, not the side with the important blood vessels, the other side. Once, twice, three times. Orange-crimson nitroglycerin-rich blood blooms on the surface right away. He jams the fingers of his opposite hand into the wounds, slathers them in blood, and smears the stuff all over the wall. It's a stupid ordeal, he's woozy and dizzy yet inflamed with adrenaline, and he definitely cut a lot deeper than he needed to, but the more blood the better so he doesn't stop until the stuff is coating a hole in the middle of the wall the size of the sun shop's door in scattered, frantic lines.

Then he checks the left door next to the hall, finds it open, and sporting a good seal. He steps inside —it's a small storage room stacked with papers— and takes the kid off his back again, leaving her bundled in the blanket as far away from the door as possible. She's confused and her fever flush looks much worse under proper lighting, but if this works they'll be on their way out of here.

"I'm gonna blow us an exit," he says and the brat nods, not quite getting it. "Cover your ears and stay here. I got no idea how loud this is gonna be."

He doesn't wait for her response, instead rushing to the door, stepping back into the hall, and trailing blood further, from the target wall closer to where he's gonna be setting it off. Katsuki fishes the lighter from his pocket, flicks it on, watches the flame dance for a couple of seconds as he walks back to the room. Then he flings the lighter into the bloody hall and closes the door, bracing himself against it.

The resulting boom is so loud even through the door it makes Katsuki's ears fuzz, and instead of stopping with a single pop, several other booms follow suit —a chain reaction of explosions. The entire building seems the tremble, and the metal of the door Katsuki is standing against is so hot it could burn. It feels like it takes ages for the booms to weaken and stop, and every explosion shakes the little room they're in, jostling papers and chipping paint. Once things seem to have calmed down, Katsuki chances opening the door.

It's a mess. Smoldering bits of rubble line the floors, char marks the

shape of blast waves create concentric patterns across the walls. He looks back to the hall they came from and finds the whole thing smoking, blackened at the edges. Looks like the blood he's been trailing around this whole time ignited alongside the stuff he actually wanted to detonate —that would explain the unforeseen, too loud explosions. The entire basement blew up. He hopes for Overhaul's sake that the closet he's in was spared this disaster, because — considering the lake of explosives Katsuki had bled in there, the resulting blast might have eaten up a whole chunk of the basement.

"Did it w-work?" calls the brat from where she's sitting, ears now uncovered. Katsuki looks to the pseudo-wall and yeah, it did. The hole is much bigger than his initial drawing, and the wall seems to be only about four or five centimeters thick. No wonder it went down so easily.

He gives himself some sloppy first aid while waiting for the hallway outside to cool down, then grabs Eri in his arms, not bothering to place her on his back again, and they start climbing up the dusty, smoked stairs. Not fun with a bullet in your leg, that's for sure.

Mirio is late. Mirio knows he's late. He'd been cornered by Chisaki's assistant and one of Chisaki's Eight Bullets, Kurono and Sakaki soon after splitting from the main search party to permeate through Irinaka's moving maze and get straight to Eri. The two of them didn't have powers suited to beating Mirio's, Kurono's requiring contact and Sakaki's a loss of balance ineffective to his ability to permeate, but they weren't easy to defeat either, seeing as they seemed to have a lot of experience tag-teaming. It didn't help that the power sputtered and shut down mid-way through the fight, which degraded into a blind cat-scuffle since no one had any sort of torch on them. Mirio won — when he used his quirk he couldn't feel or see or hear anything at all, so he's quite used to fighting with stunted senses— and locked the two of them in a spare room. But the whole thing wasted time. Too much time.

He keeps walking in spite of the blackout, following Sir's instructions to a tee and visualizing the preliminary layout of the basement they'd sketched at the office to guide him even in the darkness. There's something sweet in the air, the heavy and burnt kind. The sort of feeling you get when you've bitten off more than you can chew, bought a dessert too big, and can't have any more sugar lest you start puking. Sometimes, the sole of his foot sticks where he steps as if passing through something wet. He did see a couple of leaky pipes on

the way down, so it must be that.

He wishes he could see what's going on. He'd permeated through here though, and that meant leaving behind every supply and provision, including flashlights —everything but himself and the special clothes on his back.

Mirio walks for a while, thinking about Eri the whole time. He would've battled Chisaki right then and there in that alley, never mind the consequences, if it meant Eri could be safe and didn't have to suffer through whatever Chisaki was doing to her. He'd thought he'd been doing the right thing, but in the end, he'd left her in the clutches of a bastard even as she all but begged for help. What kind of hero is he, if he can't even save a single little girl?

A thud sounds somewhere in the distance. Clicks, faint cracks, a myriad of sounds —too murked by the winding halls to mean anything. The place is strangely empty. They hadn't assumed the Hassaikai would send all their grunts upstairs to swarm them, but it seems that's what's happened. Aside from those two Mirio defeated, there's no one in this section of the maze at all.

One of the halls he steps on, five passes away from where he's supposed to go, makes him pause. He feels something. A presence, a suffocating scent, copper, he's not sure. It's faint. There are no footsteps or breaths but his own. Mirio turns left, turns right, turns back, all that greets him is the dark. The shaking upstairs is reduced to small tremors here, and that scent of burning sugar he'd noted earlier is stronger than ever. He shivers. Waits to hear or sense any sort of movement. Nothing.

Oh well, he can't lose more time. He permeates through the next wall and keeps going.

❖❖❖

The power returns. With a flicker and fizz, it reconnects, showering the hallways in icy light. Mirio is —he'd wager— one turn away from the dead-end with Eri's room in it.

There's a little problem though. Now that he has light, he can kind of see that those sticky and wet bits of the floor he'd attributed to leaky pipes and water? Yeah, they're *blood*. There are lines of blood all over the floor. Footsteps too big to be a little kid's, clearly made by someone who wasn't wearing shoes. Mirio's heart sinks. The footsteps align with the route to Eri's room.

He gets to the landing in front of Eri's room and it gets worse. More bloody footsteps, like someone had been pacing. Among the big ones he finds ones smaller, half made, Eri's. *Oh god.* They concentrate around the front of Eri's door, which sits closed and not the least bit welcoming. If Mirio looks close enough, he can find bloody fingerprints. What the heck happened here? The briefing explained Chisaki is very germaphobic— was known to discard workers who didn't meet his standards for hygiene— and none of this screams hygiene. Chisaki doing something like this goes against every current report on his character.

Mirio is aware of his shaking hands as he inches closer to the metal door. He breathes in deep as he rests his hands on it, then turns on his quirk and slides through.

A lurch bubbles from his throat the moment he's got his quirk turned off. It smells so *bad*. Like what he'd imagine a wake would smell like without all the perfume, like it's a room stuffed with dead bodies. Blood soaks the floor in a puddle so big it could pass for a pool —it's on the walls, on the childish rainbow wallpaper, on the furniture, on the ceiling —it's everywhere. Right next to the big puddle of blood is a disgusting puddle of thin vomit, children's toys are torn and ripped to shreds, the bed is a bloody mess, and a dozen decorative lamps lay shattered to pieces all over the floor. Purple feathers stick to the splotches of blood, and the walls and tiles are spiky and deformed. A particularly big spike is coated in coagulated, crusty blood and unidentifiable… pink stuff.

Mirio can't help it. He doubles over and vomits on the floor. He's seen some pretty bad stuff in his few years of fieldwork as a provisional licensed hero, disturbing stuff both mental and physical, but this— this takes the cake.

Oh god. Where's Eri? What happened to her? What happened here? If Chisaki did this, there's no way he'd been in his right mind.

So Mirio looks. Mirio looks under the covers and under the bed and in dresser drawers Eri couldn't possibly fit in. She's not there. She's not anywhere. The overwhelming stench is making it hard to breathe. This wasn't part of the plan. He'd been prepared for the worst, but this is somehow worse than the worst.

The only place left in the whole room is the walk-in closet, and now that he's taking a proper look at it, several things stick out. First of all the sliding doors are jammed shut by a bent piece of wire. Second of

all, there's something drawn on the panels. He'd dismissed it as more blood upon first impression, but no, dripping and runny as they are — those are definitely kanji.

Stop fucking kidnapping me. I am tired.

Then as if they're dealing with some crude joke, there's the most childish rendering of what Mirio assumes is supposed to be a middle finger squiggled at the very end —a fuck you so ridiculously out of place Mirio starts to laugh.

This has got to be some type of nightmare.

"No—"

His trembling arms almost pull the closet door off its railing, and his breath hitches when his eyes fall on Chisaki, so black and blue he's hard to recognize, bandaged in some places and dotted with absurd, misaligned band-aids everywhere else. He's drooling and seems somewhere between catatonic and dead, coat ripped and bloodied.

"Oh no—what happened?!"

Mirio can't even muster up a *fake* hero smile.

"What the hell happened?!" he asks as he shakes Chisaki back and forth. An incomprehensible gurgle is all he gets in reply. Chisaki's eyes are hazed over and he looks like he can't even hold up his neck on his own. Chisaki is an A-level villain. If he was caught he'd be thrown in the highest security level of Tartarus. He's no weakling. So *what* did this to him?

"Where's Eri-chan?! C'mon, say something!" He knows it's futile — knows there's no use in making Chisaki's state worse when he won't get anything in return, but he has to know, he has to try—

"Her…"

"Her, what?"

"…Took… her…"

What is this? A horror movie?

"Who? Who did that? *Who* took Eri-chan, Chisaki?!"

"… Quirk… pops… no…" Now he's saying bullshit. Mirio lets him go

roughly, frustrated, and runs a hand through his hair in an attempt to think. A drumbeat seems to ring from somewhere, *bang bang bang.*

The footsteps outside have to belong to whoever did this to Chisaki, which means that, as long as Mirio follows them, he'll find his culprit, he'll find whoever took Eri and left behind fifth-grader doodles painted with blood. But should he try to contact Sir first? Mystery assailant is an uncalculated variable in the plan. Everyone else needs to be ready for a possible encounter. They don't know if he's a good guy or a bad guy or what he is—

An explosion so strong and deafening sounds outside it blows the metal door clean off its hinges.

"T-toga Himiko?!" Shouta hears Midoriya stutter out, an odd tone to his voice, as the faux Rock Lock melts into her true form. His shoulder burns where she stabbed it, but Shouta readies his capture scarf regardless. Damn it. Can they *ever* have a mission without these bastards showing up?!

"Midoriya, stand down," he orders the kid, who's shaking —looks very very close to losing it. Shouta can't blame him, he's very very close to losing it too.

"Izuku-kun, hi!" Toga giggles, hopping back to avoid Shouta's scarf. "It's so nice to see you here too."

"..Too?" Shouta, at last, gets her wrapped in his capture weapon, but another Toga goes and pops out from the hole in the rubble. The room shifts and twists from Irinaka's meddling. Is the one with the cloning quirk here as well?

Toga's second clone comes closer to Midoriya while Shouta is busy with her first one. He overtightens his scarf and the clone melts away. "Well, it's a nice reunion. They told us they have Kacchan—"

A pop sounds as half a hundred solid tendrils of black lighting explode outwards and smash the room apart.

"Your orders, Nemoto-san."

"The heroes have broken through the first line of defense —we aren't sure how well the floor will hold the weight of that dragon bitch either—"

“Rappa stopped responding to comms—”

“What do we do, Nemoto-san?”

❖ eleven minutes ❖

Katsuki looks back and forth in bewilderment from extra one to extra two to extra three to extra four. When he came upstairs he’d been expecting an easy exit. And it is easy enough. The kid said they’re literally one hallway and one three-step staircase away from freedom. But no, he had to get accosted by a bunch of useless Yakuza. They look at him all eager, like a drooling pack of mutts waiting to have bones of praise thrown their way. Katsuki will never get this type of villain. Why reject society to grovel all over again?

Whatever.

The kid clutches onto Nemo’s cape and has her head turned away from the goons, pretending to be asleep. Like he’d thought, they don’t find him walking around or holding onto Eri like this the least bit suspicious.

“Go fight,” he says, doing his best Nemo impression.

A goon with long, slicked-back hair and a feathery aura wrinkles her nose. “You sound odd, Nemoto-san—”

“Got a cold,” Katsuki justifies on reflex, though the idiots don’t seem convinced. “You’d be ill-advised to question it.”

“Why is your cape bloody?” asks goon number three, a guy with a cat’s face, furry aura, and stout body.

“It’s no business of yours. My orders are to go fight.”

“What about Rappa?”

“Nighteye and his agency are all in there—!”

“The police are closing in on us—”

God. Can they do anything on their own? Katsuki does not have time for this. He’s got no idea who Rappa is or why All Might’s former sidekick is anywhere near this dump or *what* these bitches are looking for. He considers Nemo’s general attitude and makes up some bullshit on the spot.

“Is this how you fulfill your duty as Overhaul-sama’s filth? Rest assured that he’ll hear of your insolence. Go fight fuckers. I’m telling you to go fight and you’re still asking questions.” He paces dramatically as they latch on to every word. “You’re goons, you don’t have brains.” Three of four nod along, as if what Katsuki’s saying makes all the sense in the world. Wow, this is easy. Nemo has trained them well. “You joined Overhaul-sama to lick his boots. Because you don’t have enough self-respect to do something and find someone better. But if you’ve chosen this path, fucking own it.” He worries for a moment that he’s gone too far with the insults, but they seem to be buying it, one even mutters: “Blunt as always Nemoto-san,” in an awed tone. “Are you scared of a bunch of cops? Those fuckers train two months and see action once a decade—and that’s me being generous. You can run circles around them while they can’t even use quirks. Fucking weaklings. So scram and fight.”

Cat guy laughs and promptly shuts up and stutters out an apology when no one starts laughing with him. Ten seconds pass in silence. Katsuki is ready to strangle someone.

“Well? What the fuck are you still here for?!”

Three of four jump and scramble right away, rushing down the opposite stairs.

The woman with the long black hair and the feathery aura stays and scrutinizes him.

“I’m leaving,” she says, narrowing her eyes.

Katsuki clears his throat. “I ordered you to fight.”

“And I think this fight is useless. It’s obvious enough that we’ve lost. I stay here because I’m scared of Overhaul— I’d rather not go to jail with him.”

What’s new, no one wants to go to jail. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because you’re not Nemoto-san, are you—?” She lunges at them, at the kid to be specific, the arms of her cheap suit ripping to reveal purple feathered talons. In the heat of the moment, the first thing Katsuki finds in his pocket is Nemo’s gun. He takes the thing out and pulls the trigger without even thinking. The woman staggers backward, crying out in pain, clutching at her shoulder. The shot was from such close range it blew a chunk of it off.

I shot someone what the fuck what the fuck what the fuck what the fuck

He's so startled he pulls the trigger again on accident, this time the shot ricocheting off the floor and into a filing cabinet. The woman, in her attempts to put distance between herself and Katsuki, has been dragging her body back and back and back, and Katsuki's second shot is the nail in the coffin, it makes her jerk so badly she slips over the landing of the stairs and tumbles down them like a sack of potatoes, leaving bloody splotches over every step she rolls.

Oh shit. Oh shit shit shit shit

Soon, she's rolled down far enough that Katsuki can't even see her anymore.

Fuck it.

Katsuki drops the gun, tears off Nemo's mask, and fucking bolts, running as fast as his half-dead legs will take him. He realizes Eri has fallen asleep for real somewhere around five seconds later, and he doesn't even care, sprinting so fast the world seems to blur.

After those three steps up, he's at the final door. He tries a dozen keycards before he finds the one that works, gets through, and shuts the door behind him.

It's fucking cold as hell. That first breath of polluted city air almost makes him cry in relief. Sunlight for the first time in four days. At fucking last. He leans against the door, coughs, feels his vision blacken as he falls back.

❖ six minutes ❖

White for two beats, then reload, reset, and he's back up and running. It's quick enough that Eri doesn't fall from his limp hands. The world is dulled, the cold is dulled, the pain is dulled, he knows he's died again. It's about time, considering all the blood he's lost. He doesn't even want to look at the state of his leg. None of it matters at that moment though, he runs out the narrow alleyway of the exit and into the street —a low-rise residential neighborhood with winter-wet, empty streets.

Katsuki checks Nemo's phone. 09:07. People are probably at work. He uses the phone again to find a map route from where he is now to the Sun Shop location, because he doesn't know Tokyo well enough to do that on his own. It's forty-five minutes by train —no can do. The

moment someone smells the blood and guts and general dirt off him, he'll get reported. There's no way he can take a kid wearing what's effectively a long tank top anywhere on the train with him without earning some, at minimum, suspicious looks either.

It's three hours to walk. Walking has the same risks as taking the train. What's he supposed to do? He'd rather not have to stay dead for too long either…

The family who owns the house two buildings down from the alleyway exit also owns a very nice bicycle, with one of those fancy kid seats that comes with a cover. This is a decent neighborhood, not one you'd expect to get your stuff stolen in, considering the bike isn't locked at all, not even with a cheap cord lock. He looks at it. It's been a bit since he rode a bike.

He writes a quick apology message to the family, drops over all the money he looted off Nemo, and nicks the bike. He puts Eri in the kid's seat after bundling her up well with the blanket, closes the cover, gets in the main seat himself, and goes on his merry way.

❖ zero minutes ❖

An hour and a half and zero interventions by suspicious passers-by later, Katsuki has dumped the bike in a back alley twenty minutes away from the shop by foot. He snakes his way through nooks and crannies, smashing Nemo's phone against the ground and stepping on it so it's thoroughly broken once he's got a clear view of that yellow front door.

Throwing all caution to the win, he barges inside with Eri in his arms, relieved to find no customers, and starts to cry for real.

"What is going— Katsuki?!" She looks worse than he's ever seen her, frail and radiating fatigue, but she's still healer hag.

"'M home."

Chapter End Notes

1) this chapter is pretty much just nonstop action and that made it very hard to write. a lot of it is unrealistic crack too, but that's what makes it fun. it's my wish-fullfillment. ironically this was meant to be the lighthearted bit after the two last horrible chapters but I took that treated seriously tag too seriously and kinda flunked it I think lol

2) I always thought the hassaikai people were really funny with their Overhaul's trash business
3) stabbing, shooting, lamp post battery? katsuki will have it all
4) poor mirio i did very much get petty and have them barely miss each other. also mirio is randomly very hard to write I feel like I have a good grasp on his character but not on how to write it so it seems like he's the one thinking if that makes sense. for anyone wondering, no mirio will not lose his quirk nor will nighteye die. Katsuki did their jobs for them lmao
5) next chapter is called "spectator" make of that what u will
6) is it blackwhip if it doesn't activate due to kacchan angst? ofc not
7) I spent way too much time on figuring out formatting for this and for what
8) for anyone thinking there appears to be a lack of emotional contemplation in this, that is very much on purpose. katsuki is currently in "haha i can't believe this is happening" mode
9) I did an unreasonable amount of research on bicycles in japan and the availability of bicycles with kid holders as if that was the part of katsuki's escape that was far-fetched. my of plan was to have him steal clothes from a trash can behind a fashion store but that was scrapped when I found out there are no typical public trash cans in tokyo, just designated trash spots
10) one draft of this chapter involved katsuki having a brief stint as an economist and blackmailing and threatening the hassaikai's accountant into bad business decisions, like blowing half the organization's earnings on a custom inflatable 30-meter tall overhaul statue. then he set the hassaikai's record room on fire. another draft had him start shooting random policemen because they're trying to shoot him in his Nemoto costume XD I'm not sure if I'm 100% satisfied with how the end product turned out so this is one of those open for editing chapters.

Chapter 19: Spectator

Chapter Summary

Many talks from the hero side

(mentions of the happenings of all the previous chapters, nightmares and vomiting)

Chapter Notes

hiiiiii

im actually kinda excited for this chapter specifically because I'm interested to see how people will react. weekly reminder that the POV is limited and everyone is unreliable

i always think I'm making izuku or aizawa different from canon but then i kinda have to, considering i have to take into account the different routes of development they've gone through here and the fact that izuku goes to therapy, etc, so I hope the reactions and such make sense

some people might find this chapter boring, but other characters react to insane shit XX character has been doing is one of my favorite self-indulgent tropes, so *shrugs* i hope you'll be able to hang in there

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ten days ago, between twenty-one and twenty-four, a contractor working for the Hassaikai delivered Bakugou Katsuki to Chisaki Kai and his right-hand man, Kurono Hari.” Bubble girl’s voice trembles with slight nervousness. “The corpse of this contractor, missing its top half, was found in a shipping container —No. 5022 belonging to the Ayukawa Shipping Corp, who as has been so far determined, appear otherwise unaffiliated with this case. The corpse was only found after three days due to tampering on the part of Yakuza-connected security managers at the pier, and DNA testing couldn’t be done in time to connect the incident to the Hassaikai.

Later retrieved security camera footage from nearby businesses showed Chisaki and Kurono entering the area, and DNA close to Bakugou Katsuki’s was identified on pieces of tape, stains on the container floor, and the victim, Hokori Hanahito’s vehicle. Detectives

assumed this is where Bakugou's drop-off occurred, and Kurono confirmed it under truth quirk. He was later taken into the Hassaikai's main base."

A heavy air weighs down the meeting room, tinted with guilt and disappointment. It's a debriefing with all the heads of the agencies involved, so everyone will be on the same page when drafting up their reports. He'd begged Sir to be allowed to sit in, and he thinks Aizawa-sensei may have asked Izuku be given permission as well, because Sir caved with surprising ease. On the opposite end of the table, a Kirishima so plastered it would put a mummy to shame sits static. Amajiki-senpai isn't here. They'd been on the same page, it seems.

Izuku holds the bottom of his chair tightly. It's got a black frame and a blue cushion, the fabric frayed at the corner. Several people wince in their seats. Most are glaring down in frustration, some leaning back in fatigue. You'd struggle to find someone in here without any bandages on them.

It's been four days since the disaster. Four days of hospital stays and non-stop investigation. As far as Izuku is concerned, the raid on the Hassaikai was a colossal failure. Their main objective of securing Eri-chan, and their secondary objectives of capturing Chisaki and the rest of the Eight Bullets— none of them had been met in the proper way.

"Hokori was wanted for kidnapping and human trafficking after his involvement in the Ginza Itoya Burning Car incident. During that incident, a mystery assailant —now confirmed to be Bakugou Katsuki — interrupted the attempted kidnapping of Gabriel Miyamura. Hokori and his partner had been smuggling victims, most foreigners or young children, to Hassaikai affiliated trafficking rings for years, and this time they were also joined by a new recruit. It seems Hokori held a grudge against Bakugou for getting him busted and begged Kurono for a second chance in order to catch him."

Izuku's mind is spinning. The Ginza Itoya Burning Car incident had circulated in hero forums for weeks because of its… strangeness. It made for an odd, sensational story, and the details of a mysterious hero and dramatic vehicle fire were the exact kind of thing the media loves to feed on. Thanks to it, news of Kacchan's (fake) death made headlines in Tokyo for a shorter amount of time compared to the rest of Japan.

(Not that there weren't plenty of headlines anyway. Two narratives permeated public opinion. Some news sites spun the story of Kacchan

as an ultimate victim, abandoned by the system and too far scrutinized for any teenager, while others kept championing Kacchan as an irredeemable monster, calling the death declaration and gruesome evidence of torture “guilt trips” and “PR ploys”. Izuku hated both sides, one for trying to sweep their own pouring criticisms of Kacchan under the rug, and the other for having disgusting proof of a human having been treated like— like shit for a month and daring to call it phony. Ugh. The more he thinks about it the more it makes his blood boil. He remembers wishing at the time— when Kacchan was still Schrodinger's Kacchan, equal measures alive and dead— that the media would be banned from ever typing even half of Kacchan’s name again. No matter what they said, all of it was bullshit.)

Never had he thought Kacchan could’ve been the mystery hero of the incident, even when bits of the report left at the scene published by the police department struck him as oddly familiar.

“Apologies for speaking up so late, but I thought Bakugou-kun was declared dead before the Itoya incident even happened. How could he have done any of this?” asks Ryuukyuu. Several other people in the room seem to have the same question.

Sir clears his throat to explain, saving Bubble Girl the trouble, “From what I understand, the death declaration was court-ordered and mostly to clear him for the bank incident that had happened two weeks or so prior. There’s never been a corpse.” He looks to Aizawa-sensei for confirmation and Sensei gives a curt nod.

“The articles said All For One himself claimed to have killed him. How does a kid even go up against that?” says Rock Lock skeptically, arms crossed in front of him. “I mean… that bastard made *All Might* retire.”

“If the League is looking for him and his DNA is everywhere, he’s obviously not dead.”

“But how—”

“We’ll get to that.”

Sensei’s gaze is trained on him, he knows. Izuku knows he’s shaking too. He’d asked to be here himself, but he’s not sure how well he’s gonna be able to handle it —be able to handle Kacchan talked about like some detached cold case. Bubble girl continues where she left off, before the stress of everything can make discussion devolve into time-wasting arguments. “According to Kurono, the Hassaikai wanted Bakugou for two reasons. First, to serve as a bargaining chip for their

budding relationship with the League of Villains who've promised huge rewards to anyone who locates Bakugou. Second, because there are rumors traveling in underground circles of him being able to interact with quirk factors and 'make them go haywire'."

This elicits a few gasps. Kirishima's stance seems to get tighter. He stares at the floor. Meanwhile, Izuku's eyes widen. It's news to him too. Kacchan had told him he was quirkless, he *had* to be or he never would've been able to get past UA security.

"Is that even possible?"

"Wasn't the kid's quirk blowing stuff up?"

"The Hassaikai also had these questions, so they largely captured Bakugou to… figure out how he worked."

Izuku's heart stutters. His shaking gets worse. *I am tired* in bold bloody characters bounces around in the confines of his mind, all accusatory. He'd known it would be bad, yet for some reason, he'd still hoped for the opposite.

"For the following four days, Chisaki performed various experiments on Bakugou. Some of the… sessions were taped, recorded, or written down as part of Chisaki's research. Apart from an abnormal amount of nitroglycerin in his blood and a few places where he seemed able to use body parts with the nerves connected to them damaged, Bakugou's body was the same as a regular human's adapted to an explosion based quirk."

"So there's nothing going on after all?"

"Well." Bubble girl checks something on the laptop in front of her. Izuku hears her click once, twice. Then the projector flickers on. It's a black screen. "This is one of the recovered recordings—"

Speakers blare to life, offset by a constant wall of static. Then sounds a voice unfamiliar to Izuku: *"How did you escape the League?"*

Izuku's knuckles are white on the chair's edge. Bubble girl pauses the clip. A big play symbol takes over the center of the screen. Izuku breathes in. Breathes out.

"That's the voice of Nemoto Shin." Further introductions are unnecessary. They were all there for the first briefing. They all know Nemoto is one of the Eight Bullets. "And this is Bakugou's reply."

The following word is a jumble of static and interference, so fuzzy and glitched it makes Izuku jump. Has there been an error with their systems? Why would Kacchan sound like that?

“We had it sent to specialists who had it cleaned up as much as possible and this is what we got.”

It’s a lot clearer, only muffled around the edges, like the sound you get when someone calls you while you’re in the elevator, or when the wind is blowing into your microphone. It’s Kacchan’s voice clear as day, clear enough it makes Izuku’s breath hitch.

“I walked.”

That’s so very Kacchan Izuku almost laughs, which would have been wholly inappropriate and would have absolutely turned into crying within five seconds. *Keep it together,* Izuku. *Keep it together.*

“Video recordings, with their audio cleaned they looked like this:”

On screen is a concrete room like all the concrete rooms in that basement, illuminated by round spotlights. The camera is grainy and placed at an awkward angle, a thing likely for show anyway. Chisaki is there, along with Nemoto, but in the elongated chair Izuku assumes Kacchan would be in, there’s nothing but a blob of static. The footage begins to roll.

“I ain’t helping you destroy quirks or whatever the fuck. Not interested in sucking up to people .”

The more footage rolls the worse the interference seems to get, making the camera fizz and crackle. Everyone is dead silent— you could hear a speck of dust colliding with the desk if you tried.

“I’m giving you a chance to work with me without any pain or discomfort,” says Chisaki his voice so clear compared to Kacchan’s it makes Kacchan’s seem even more incomprehensible.

Kacchan’s form is wobbly. Once every couple of seconds, the camera blanks out entirely.

“And I’m telling you to fuck off.”

Deeming it sufficient a demonstration and feeling everyone’s discomfort at being forced to watch what’s essentially a censored torture session, Sir signals Bubble Girl and she stops the clip.

“Kid’s got balls,” notes Rock Lock, an obvious attempt at dispelling some tension.

He does, though Izuku wishes Kacchan never had to be put in situations like this to prove it.

“What’s with all tha' interference?” asks Fatgum, who still hasn’t returned to full size after using up all his stored fat during the raid. The resulting effect makes his hero costume hang in a sad, floppy way.

Bubble Girl sighs. “We’re not sure —that’s the thing. Chisaki’s notes also describe Bakugou as disassociating often, washed out in appearance, and very uncooperative. Sensors, alarms, and electrical devices generally don’t register him at all. And the quirk messing ability is also true, it’s confirmed by Bakugou himself a little down the line —you can check the transcripts in the papers in front of you if you want to see for yourself.”

Izuku opens the book of transcripts, lays eyes on *>> Then how is it that you touch quirks?! >>Not saying, fucker >> [Chain of events unclear— Chisaki gets frustrated at lack of cooperation and likely overhauls a part of Bakugou’s body. Red spray…]* and closes it back up again. He’d had enough of a hard time reading Kacchan’s own report from the League, if he reads about things that happened to the person he’d once played hero with using paper towel tubes as swords and pillowcases as capes worded like a clinical scientific journal, Izuku might puke.

“Changes in appearance from a loss of pigmentation might explain why he’s been scarcely recognized, and he used chalk dyes for his hair, according to Kurono.”

“What color?” Kirishima asks, startling Izuku and surprising Bubble girl with the less than regular question.

“Pink.” Kirishima seems to freeze, mummified as he is. “It was light when he was found and faded away due to the experiments and time. Why do you ask?”

His classmate stares at the desk in front of him, not meeting Bubble Girl’s eyes. “I— no reason.”

Bubble girl seems unconvinced but lets the matter drop, while the police department representative sitting three seats left of Izuku mutters a faint “unprofessional kids” under his breath. Togata-senpai is stiff beside Izuku, face set in that blank expression he’s been

sporting since the raid.

“I was right next to them at one point,” Togata-senpai says, desperate. Izuku uses the wall (all bloodied. with Kacchan’s blood—) to brace himself as he takes in the wrecked room. Kacchan’s handwriting glares at him from the closet door. He was too late again. If only one for all hadn’t decided to go out of control— if only he’d been a tiny bit faster. “I know I was right next to them. I felt there was something off. But I couldn’t see because of the lights— the lights, of all things—” He laughs but all Izuku can hear is frustration.

Aizawa-sensei walks out of the closet with Chisaki in it and taps them both on the shoulder. Izuku notes his tense stance, his clicked jaw. A sickly smell of sweet copper blurs Izuku’s senses. “We’d better clear out,” Sensei says. “We’ve tampered with the scene enough as is.” The halls outside, by now cooled down, are, in some spots, covered in soot, while the pipes that burst from the explosions have leaked streams of water to form patches of mud. “For now let’s try to follow the path of blast damage and clog any leaking waterways on the way. We might still have a chance to find him.”

“Coincidentally, the morning the raid was set to happen was also the morning when Bakugou chose to escape. We reviewed the footage and interrogated the guard in question—”

“*The police department* interrogated the guard in question,” corrects the representative.

“Yes—the police department—did that, um.” Bubble girl clears her throat. “The guard claims Bakugou asked to go to the bathroom, but attacked him through the bars when he got close, made him lightheaded by forcing him to ingest the nitroglycerin-like substance in his blood, and bashed him against the cell door until he passed out. The account rings true with the rest of our evidence. The guard suffered a minor concussion and a hairline fracture on his left cheekbone.”

Izuku is not sure if thinking *serves him right* makes him a bad person.

“After that, we assume Bakugou roamed the halls of the compound hoping to find an exit, the large surface area exploded implies he’d been treading his blood all over the place for quite a while. Eventually, he came to find Eri’s room. The room had security cameras.”

Three clicks later and they’ve got a two perspective view of the room, unblemished by fighting or blood. Izuku blinks and he sees it painted

red. Blinks again and it's like nothing's happened at all. The clock at the camera's corner ticks on and on. The door opens and Kacchan (or the blob that's supposedly him) steps inside, fumbles by the door, moves back and forth. Izuku wishes he could get a proper look at him, without the mask of static.

All of a sudden, blob Kacchan powerwalks to the bed, rips off the covers and stands next to Eri. The only speech loud enough for the camera to catch is Kacchan's warbled *"What the fuck?"*. The two of them seem to have a back and forth and when Chisaki opens that door, Izuku flinches. Everyone watching is fixated.

The walls explode into spikes, the floors follow suit. Blob Kacchan jumps around, barely avoiding them. Izuku's stomach swoops with every near-miss, and soon, the shifting of the room sends the security cameras tumbling, one breaks, fizzing to black, while the other lands on the ground at an awkward angle. They can't see anything but the placement is better for the microphone, which picks up a lot more than it did when it was stuck to the top of the wall.

Sounds of battle cease, and to everyone's surprise, they hear Chisaki talking to Eri.

"—Shit, he was too easy to kill." Huh? *"Look what you made me do Eri!"* What? *"See how everyone around you suffers? See how everyone who defies me suffers?"* What does that mean? What happened? Why is he speaking like Kacchan is done and dusted? That *can't* be true.

The victim-blaming continues for a while. Izuku grits his teeth through it.

"Unless you want to end up like that—" The threat is interrupted by an even more warped voice. Kacchan's familiar cadence is drowned out by terrible static.

"…hear the….of that sentence …ah?"

Shocked is the only word you could use to describe everyone in the briefing room. Kacchan orders Eri to leave while he does *something* that makes Chisaki scream horribly. Never in his life has Izuku heard a human sound like they're in this much pain. It's like a piece of his soul is being ripped out. Once Eri has, they assume, left the room, the screaming only gets worse, going on and on and on even when the lights shut down. Izuku feels sewn to his seat. He's grateful when Bubble girl turns down the speakers a few minutes in, because he almost starts feeling bad for Chisaki.

Soon, both the recording and the real room are blanketed by silence.

"…That boy is a monster," mutters the police representative.

"I suppose his reputation is not for show," the HPSC caseworker says.

Rock lock scoffs. Izuku has noticed how he'd been flipping through the written transcripts the moment the video started, to distract himself from whatever nightmare fuel has been happening on screen. "Chisaki used him as a lab rat him for four days. It says here they gouged his eyes out at one point. Anyone would snap in that kind of situation."

"Not saying he was wrong." The representative leans back. "But in all my thirty years on this job, I ain't ever hear a grown man scream like that."

Shuffling noises from the speakers interrupt the back and forth, then there's a glitchy *"I fucked it up… said you… knew I would,"* in a strained voice that takes Izuku's heart, tears it apart, and runs over the pieces. More shuffling. Static over static. Through the microphone, they hear sobbing.

Izuku hasn't heard Kacchan make any sort of noise while crying in a good decade. At most, he'd tear up and rush to hide it under his bangs. The last time he remembers proper crying, Kacchan was five and had dislocated his left shoulder because of a bad fall. Izuku and the other neighborhood kids had tried to help, but they'd only made things worse, and the marriage of pain and embarrassment had sent Kacchan into a scream crying tantrum.

This isn't a scream crying tantrum though, this is something darker. It's familiar in a way Izuku has tried his best to forget.

"We've 'heard 'nough, don't ya think?" says Fatgum, unashamed by his red-rimmed eyes. Izuku's vaguely aware of the fact that he himself has been crying for a while now. He's used to it. Tears come like a reflex he doesn't even bother to put a lid on anymore.

The complaint is for naught since the recording soon ends on its own anyway.

"Uh… the camera, being no longer attached to the electrical system, relied on built-in batteries to work. They ran out of juice at this point," Bubble Girl explains, wringing her fingers back and forth. "From there it's anyone's best guess as to what happened, but our consensus is that Bakugou performed first aid on Chisaki, left him in

the closet, wrote a message quote stop fucking kidnapping me I am tired endquote on the closet door, then continued to search for an exit, this time with Eri in hand."

She clicks out of the software entirely. "At some point they must have come across Nemoto Shin, who attempted to shoot them, going by the multiple bullets we found fractured or embedded in the walls and floors of one of the halls. Nemoto was discovered thrown in a side room stripped of everything but his underwear, bleeding heavily from the back of the head. The medical examiner said he'd been bashed repeatedly —had cracks in his skull and damaged blood vessels in at least three spots in his brain. He was being kept alive with machinery, but had five strokes after his surgery and… passed away late last night."

Izuku's heart sinks. He thinks of all the times he's gone into battle with injuring a villain in mind —without caring much about what that means, what it could mean in truth. Kacchan *killed* someone. And the scariest part is that Izuku's feeling less horrified at the concept of Kacchan being a murderer than ethics would dictate. Because Nemoto had *tortured* Kacchan, while the Hassaikai, and he by extension, dealt in trafficked *children*.

"After defeating Nemoto, Bakugou it seems stole his clothes and belongings. From 8:40 to 8:50 he sent a series of rapid messages from Nemoto's phone— most insults. Then, we assume he blew a hole in the wall to get upstairs, which also triggered the chain of explosions in the rest of the basement. This clip is from the moments he spent on the top floor, dressed as Nemoto, after getting intercepted by a few Yakuza."

Nemoto's outfit lessens the fuzzies, but Kacchan still appears a blob of black. He's holding on to Eri. With bated breath, Izuku watches him play the four Yakuza by their tail ends. Three of them leave but one remains, speaking to Kacchan in suspicion. It happens fast, the woman lunging forward, the click of a gun, her cry and staggering steps, the blob's hesitation, another shot, the woman disappearing from the frame, and Kacchan doing the same soon after.

"What… happened?"

"The woman, Tobitori Ai, is a mid-ranked member of the Hassaikai. After she lunged at him, Bakugou shot her in the shoulder. It shattered her clavicle and ripped a chunk from her trapezius muscle. The aftermath made her roll down the equivalent of five flights of stairs,

and she sustained enough spinal damage that she's paralyzed from the upper waist down."

A couple of hisses around the room. Kacchan… had not held his punches.

"Tobitori claimed it would be obvious the person wearing Nemoto's costume wasn't him to anyone who'd spoken to Nemoto before, and the only reason the other Yakuza didn't notice anything was that they were low ranked members who'd had few interactions with any of the Eight Bullets— 'They were running on assumptions and bullshit as they sucked up to him and he didn't call it out,' she said."

"So Bakugou got lucky."

"Pretty much yeah. Our last traces of him came from a family living in Komori-minami, where the exit Bakugou left from lead to, who reported their family bike having been stolen off their property with seventy-thousand yen in bloodied cash and a letter saying, "Sorry for stealing your bike. I'd bring it back but ill probably destroy it. Have some money," dumped by the gates of their house after returning from a trip that evening."

"And let me guess, you trailed the bike and found nothing."

Bubble Girl looks down. "We did find the bike, dumped in a back alley an hour's ride away. Nemoto's phone was smashed right by it. The police department issued a search warrant for the area in a three-kilometer radius, but again nothing."

"Three kilometers *is* nothing." The hero commissioner criticizes. "That boy has played you all. He made a mess of this whole mission."

"What about Chisaki?" Ryuukyuu asks, ignoring the man beside her. Many of the heroes seem tense whenever the commissioner speaks, Izuku notes. He wasn't there during the pre-raid briefings either.

"Near catatonic. His physical injuries weren't serious and he'd received first aid in time, but he seems to have reverted to the mental capacity of a young child and is only capable of repeating short phrases. Doctors said it's likely trauma-induced. He doesn't even remember how to read or write."

"Isn't that a little… extreme?"

"Well, he also had no quirk energy."

Silence.

“What’s that supposed to mean—?”

“All traces of his quirk were gone. Every quirk level test administered on him came back as zero.”

Izuku remembers those quirk-level tests. He remembers them well. They’d gone from hospital to hospital, his mom and him, trying each and every test and machine. Izuku gave DNA, stood in strange rooms, got strapped in into tunnel-like devices, was scanned all over with handheld scanners— the results were always the same. Only 1024.3 AP. Far too little to form a quirk. It was possible for quirk levels to increase, but if they hadn’t passed the cutoff score when the kid hit age four or five, they were ninety-nine percent quirkless. The pinky joint had been the final nail in the coffin.

“…are you trying to say Bakugou got his hands on a quirk erasing bullet—?"

“No, we’re saying Bakugou ripped Chisaki’s quirk off manually with this new mystery ability he possesses,” says Nighteye.

“Forgive me for the language, but that’s bullshit— it’s impossible.”

Nighteye’s gaze in heavy. “It’s unanimous among everyone looking for him on the villain side that he can do ‘something’ to quirks and interact with quirk factors. Nothing is off the table.”

“Interacting with quirks…taking them away…” Izuku mumbles to himself. “That sounds like All For One.”

“It *does* sound like All For One.” Izuku looks up, not having expected Nighteye to pick up his line of thought. “But it’s not a quirk —or rather, it can’t be. Bakugou insisted he was quirkless, and Chisaki’s notes have his quirk levels jotted down as zero.”

“If his blood still explodes, he can’t be quirkless,” points out Ryuukyuu.

“That would be an obvious conclusion, yes, but it isn’t where anomalies end. His blood does have quirk energy. A *lot* of it. Measured at 9,340 AP. He just emits none of it unless he’s bleeding. Plus, we got permission to use UA’s records and hospital records dating even further back and compare them to Bakugou’s current blood, and he never used to have anything beyond trace amounts of the NG-like

substance in it, fluctuating between one to two percent. Now, his blood is about half as concentrated as low-grade dynamite. He's got five liters of it in his body at any given time, that's five kg of weak dynamite, could release a good two hundred PSI in overpressure at one meter's distance if ignited. For reference, *twenty* PSI is enough to demolish heavy concrete buildings."

"With those numbers, he should be getting some typa poisoning," argues Fatgum.

"He should also be dead twice over now from losing at least four pints of blood to the floors of both his cell at the League and Eri's room, but as we can see, he's not." Nighteye sighs. "On top of that, his DNA is a bit different every time we take a look at it, and it needs special grade machinery standardized for volatile quirk-enhanced blood to even be detected."

"We also found um… traces of lung tissue, bone fragments, and spinal fluid on a spike in Eri's room. For those types of remains, someone needs to have been impaled on it. In the chest area, to be specific. It… wasn't a small spike," adds Bubble Girl.

A bad feeling is bubbling under Izuku's skin. An aching sense of wrongness.

"Overhaul *did* say he killed him."

"And then what? Bakugou started walking around with a hole in his chest? That's ridiculous," says Kesagiriman.

"That's—"

"Enough," says Nighteye. "The chances may be slim, but there are plenty of possibilities. Kurono explained Chisaki's daughter has a quirk that allows her to rewind living beings to their previous states. She could have done it. Chisaki himself could have put him back together…"

"Is there a possibility that Bakugou-kun is a —what were they called… Nomu?" suggests Ryuukyuu. The idea makes Izuku squirm.

"The League did intend to turn him into one," confirms Sensei, who's been oddly quiet as they've been listening. "As far as we know, it never got done all the way."

"But he might still have *some* body modifications, no? It would explain

his strange resilience. The Nomu at Hosu would grow their whole bodies back as long as they had their heads."

"Thanks to regeneration quirks though. Machinery says Bakugou's quirkless."

"I don't know then…" Ryuukyuu admits.

"So, in short, the boy defies nature even in the realm of quirks," says the commissioner. No one else speaks. "He's a freak occurrence."

"You—"

"I am right, am I not? He is not on cameras, not on audio recordings, sensors and machines fail to pick him up —as if he does not exist, or is not supposed to be there. He is a walking bomb of poison and can rip away something ingrained into a person's very genetic makeup forever, with his bare hands," he counts off. "Unnatural is a kind thing to say. On top of this, he is most definitely volatile mentally, has engaged in vigilantism, kidnapped a child among many punishable offenses, and has no concept of self-restraint. He can not be allowed to roam free."

"With all due respect, you're talking as if he's some animal, and not a human being who's been by now held captive and tortured by multiple villain organizations," says Sensei in a tight tone, the one that appears bored but in actuality means "now you've done it" —the one he uses when Izuku or any of his classmates does something reckless or life-threatening when there's no need for it. "Everything he did in there could pass for self-defense—and easily."

"You may be correct, but he would need to stand in front of the court and prove it as every other citizen. Nothing he has done is equivalent to minimum damage." Izuku bites his tongue.

"Prove he had a right to fight back against the person who'd taken out his organs one by one?" A raised eyebrow, a rising flat tone.

"Easy, Eraser. He is not your boy anymore." For a split second, Sensei looks like he got sucker-punched. "I recall you were the one who expelled him for having a tendency to go too far in the first place. You should understand what I am saying better than anyone—

"That's not—"

"And look, alright." The commissioner raises his hands in a gesture of

faux friendliness and compromise. “I am well-aware you believe I am being the villain here, but I am only repeating what is mandated should happen by law. I am not saying he *will* be thrown in jail— or even that he should be… The boy left a lot of blood in the room of the child, yes?”

“Can ya blame ‘im for gettin' that far injured by Chisaki—?” cuts in Fatgum.

“Yes?” insists the commissioner, addressing Nighteye. Nighteye nods.

“And had the goddess of luck smiled upon us any less, this blood may have very well ignited with the rest of it, resulting in a blast strong enough cause major structural damage and injure or kill several more people —including this young man here, who would have been at the epicenter of the blast at the time.” Togata-senpai stiffens, wanting no part in the discussion. “Yes?”

“Yes.”

“So this could have been even worse a disaster, am I correct?”

“Again, can ya blame ‘im for tryin’ to escape—”

“Am I correct, or no?”

“Yes,” repeats Nighteye

“And that the law states such an incident would require even licensed heroes sit in a trial, am I right there too?”

“Could…would… it *didn’t* happen though, did it?” argues Sensei. “Will he be punished for what ifs?”

“You misunderstand my point. I feel for the boy and am all for having him declared innocent by exonerating circumstances, but a trial needs to happen regardless. We can not bend the rules of justice as we please. He has a body to his name. That’s more than enough to warrant a trial. The prior possibility I presented is but an example of what that boy is capable of if he is allowed to roam free without proper care or consequences.”

“*Consequences*? He’s the victim in this situation. He is *sixteen* and running away from people who *tortured* him. He even tried to pay for the bicycle he stole.”

“Lovely gesture no doubt, but he did not ‘run away’, he also kidnapped a child, murdered a man, and permanently mutilated several more. Do you know how many of the vilest villains are born from horrifying experiences? How many of them were once victims? Bakugou could be the next. He has the precedent and personality. Age is no excuse when you are prepared to leave others paralyzed or dead. If he were truly a proper citizen, he would have called the police with Nemoto’s phone and handed in the girl upon leaving. Yet, he did not, he texted petty insults and death threats instead—”

“Call the police…we don’t even know what state he left the Hassaikai in. Maybe he’s dead in a ditch!” Sensei blinks hard, incredulous. “Getting ‘punishment’ for trying to make it out of that hellhole alive—*that* will push someone into villainy far more than self-defense ever could. Those villains that start out as victims end up villains because *the system* fails them, and you’re begging to fail Bakugou—”

“Do not put words in my mouth—”

“You’re sure riding hard for that scum Chisaki and his minions, huh?” Rocklock cuts in, silencing both of them. “Enough of this ethics class talk. The combined fingers of everyone in this room wouldn’t be enough to count all the active heroes in Japan with permanent injury and kill counts— and that's just the ones I know about. A commissioner of all people has no legs to stand on when it comes to giving lectures about what you are and aren’t allowed to do to villains.”

“What are you insinuating?”

“Anyone with two licks of experience in this room knows full well what I’m ‘insinuating’” He gives the word a light, mocking tilt, coupling it with air quotes. Izuku’s feet are cold, as though he’s dipped them into an ugly underbelly he’d never been warned about, sitting here frozen while the adults argue. Even Togata-senpai beside him seems out of his depth. “Though we love to pretend otherwise. Heroism ain’t squeaky clean. That kid did everything he could to survive, and he got another kid out of there with him. He even bothered to bandage the bastard. No hero would be punished for taking out two of the Hassaikai’s most important players in any universe.”

“Bakugou-kun is no hero.” Izuku feels similar to how he felt upon laying eyes on Toga Himiko in the basement —ready to pop. He sits on his hands, breathes in and out.

Rock Lock laughs like he's listening to something ridiculous. "Even worse, he's a civilian, and a minor to boot. His rep is trash but the law would be on his side if there's a sliver of fairness to it, with all this evidence." He runs a hand down his face."That he needs to be tried, I get that, but the way you're talking about him…What's your angle here? Because I know you're smart enough to understand you're not making sense right now."

The commissioner snaps his mouth shut, glares, opens his mouth again. Rock Lock doesn't let him speak.

"Let me guess. You want the kid on trial so he's deemed too volatile and the HPSC gets guardianship of him." Izuku never even knew that was possible. It's the commissioner's turn to laugh.

"Such a thing has not occurred in decades."

"You'd love for it to occur now though, yeah?"

"His parents are not qualified to care for him. Research gleaned from this could shed important light on how quirks work—"

"*There* you go." Rock lock sits back, half satisfied and half disgusted. "Should've said you wanted the lab rat to yourselves from the start."
Lab rat?

"That won't be happening," Aizawa-sensei says firmly.

"Do you propose UA take him instead, or perhaps you yourself?"

Sensei is taken aback.

"You took care of him *fantastically* the first time after all—we are witnessing the ripe fruits of your labor." No reply. "Or do you posit that you are not to blame, and he could not be salvaged—"

"Sh—"

The commissioner raises his hand, narrowing both eyes. "I would appreciate it if you could remain calm. We are in a professional environment. Act the part. The HPSC would simply offer Bakugou-kun much needed, *proper* guidance—

Sir bangs one of his weighted stamps on his desk, commanding everyone be quiet. "Arguing can happen outside of my office and agency. These discussions can be saved for later. The first priority

should be finding both Bakugou and Eri and getting them to safety."

"It would be a lot easier had you searched more than three kilometers on every side. If he is not 'dead in a ditch', the boy could be on the other side of Japan by now."

"The police department has never been very enthusiastic when it comes to Bakugou though, have they—?" Sensei mutters under his breath.

The police representative picks up on it and sneers. "Excuse me? We didn't even know one hundred percent if it was him we were dealing with! We ain't the institution whose students let the girl go the first time nor the institution who fumbled things so bad with this Bakugou they stuck a target to his back, left him a sitting duck, and took a month to even bother checking if he was good or not—"

Izuku stands up, dragging his chair back with him. He looks to Sir, pleading for permission to be excused, and once he gets the acknowledgment of confirmation, sprints straight out of the meeting room, barging past Centipeter in the hall and making a beeline for the bathroom to vomit.

The drive to UA is hushed. The third years took their own car — Hadou-san had recently gotten her license and insisted on driving them home so as not to inconvenience any of the older heroes. Izuku and his classmates meanwhile are driven by Aizawa-sensei. Kirishima was granted shotgun due to his two broken legs. Were it not for Recovery Girl being at UA, Kirishima would still be at the hospital. Ever since he made that single question in the meeting, he's been spaced out.

Izuku, Uraraka, and Asui are squished together in the cramped back seats. Izuku presses his face against the window and stares the whole ride home. Uraraka had asked what was wrong with him after he'd barged out of the meeting room suddenly, and he's promised to tell her tomorrow. For now, he wants to focus on nothing but the lights of the city running by. It's rare that he gets to take a drive after all. The traffic is bad, and the trip takes so long, Izuku falls into his seat.

Green costume melts into nothing, melts into pale skin. Izuku looks up and comes face to face with her, again, yellow hair and over-obsessed eyes. The maze around them twists and shifts, trying to box him in. He's in the license exam again— the first one, hidden behind debris with fake Kacchan on his back.

“T-toga Himiko?!” he stutters out, stuck on that expression on her face, the one she’d forced Kacchan’s face to make. She hops around, uncaring of her nakedness, while Izuku is stuck, waiting, expecting to see a version of Kacchan long gone again.

He gets none of it, is barraged by Sensei’s words of warning and Sensei taking Toga away.

She doubles like some sort of cancerous mutation, Sensei has caught one but another has appeared. There’s something under Izuku’s skin, at the same time begging him to act and keeping him frozen. His eyes are stuck on Toga, but his feet aren’t keeping up.

“Hi!” she says, voice sickly sweet. “Nice to see you here too!"

“Too?” he hears himself ask, not quite there. Goosebumps break out onto the surface of his crawling skin.

She comes close. Too close again. Suffocating. “It’s a nice reunion. They told us they have Kacchan—”

He breaks. That’s the only way he could describe it. An inhale then pain exploding from his fingers in a black lightning burst. He doesn’t get what’s going on, out of control and driven by instinct. The only thing he’s thinking is capturing Toga. The maze blurs, the world blurs, the only things left are Izuku, his target, and his lightning nets. They’re everywhere. He can’t stop them. Can’t start them either. They just are. They wrap around Toga and tighten, disintegrating her into mud.

“What are you doing—?!”

For a moment, he’s confused. Why is Toga made of clay all of a sudden? Then he remembers. Toga is a clone. There’s nothing there to capture.

There’s a lot in the room to destroy though, the walls, the floors, anywhere Irinaka may be sticking his head out of. The whips leave deep gashes where they impact, and Izuku tries desperately to get them to stop. What does Toga mean? When she says they have Kacchan? Why can’t Izuku ever master One for All? Why must there always be five hitches in the plan, ten unpredicted obstacles? Why is he so useless?

“Run, Sensei!” he cries out, trying and failing to contain the new quirk. Of all times! When he’d worked so hard to become stable with One for All! When he’d trained so hard with Float! Why is this happening?! “I can’t control it. I don’t know what’s going on! Run before you get hurt!”

But instead of erasing Izuku's quirk like he's supposed to, Sensei only stands there as the whips tear him apart, chunk by chunk. He melts into Toga, into mom, into Eri-chan, into All Might, into Kacchan… all torn away, all destroyed.

"No, stop it!" he yells out again as the scene changes from basement to training grounds, the smoldering remains of Kacchan's gauntlets in pieces on the ground, the heaviness of Kacchan's limp body on his shoulders, the taste of failure. All Might looms like a shadow, goes from hero costume to regular shirt, from muscle form to emaciated skeleton in a blink, lifts his shirt to show his horrible injury, which opens and bleeds and leaks anew. His mentor's familiar build remelts, hair going shorter, blonder, spikier, shoulders shrinking and sloping, stature decreasing.

"Deku," Kacchan says, with red painting his teeth—with All Might's scar but as it would have been as a fresh injury, raw and nauseating. He smiles, or grimaces, but it's all blood. "I'm sorry, Deku."

Sorry Deku.

Deku.

Izuku.

"Deku-kun?" Uraraka slapping his cheek awakens him.

"Wha—huh, wa—?" he slurs dumbly.

"We're here." *Oh*. It was a dream. Of course, it was. The grogginess fades. The car has stopped.

Izuku opens the door and gets a lungful of cool December air, tinged with the scent of pine. It's cold. He tightens the scarf around his neck. Before he has a chance to step outside and help Kirishima do the same, Sensei is leaning over the back of his seat. "Uraraka, Asui, could you help Kirishima inside? I've got a few things to discuss with Midoriya."

The girls look back and forth a few times before eventually nodding and stepping out, the car lifting up a little at every loss of mass. They help Kirshimia too, and the big three intercept them after locking up the car they've parked a few spots away. Izuku watches them get smaller and smaller until they've disappeared. The school-owned cars are neither old nor new, a solid average, with worn but clean seats and out-of-date hand cranked window opening mechanisms. The front light that's supposed to be used for reading but that Izuku has never

seen turned on in any of the… four cars he's been in is indeed switched on, showering the space with a yellow glow. Bobble-head All Might sits on the dashboard.

Sensei waits to see that the other students have made it into the dorm compound safely, then digs into his pockets for a foil pouch.

Genki-Go reads the front of the packaging. *Over twenty types of vitamins in every sip!!!* claims one of the captions below. In Izuku's hands, it makes a squishy noise. The cap is colored pink. "It's good for replenishing energy and electrolytes," Sensei says.

Izuku twists the pouch open and drinks. Tastes of peach milk tea.

He doesn't say anything and neither does Sensei. Seconds tick by. Izuku wonders if Sensei just made him wait to give him the juice pouch. A part of him hopes that's the case. The other part of him knows it isn't.

"Do you have anything you'd like to tell me?" Yup. There we go. Sensei is gonna ask about One for All, about the black lighting Izuku has come to learn is called Blackwhip. You can't see it activating that close and not realize Izuku's quirk makes no sense whatsoever and doesn't align at all with its promised description. Float had been somewhat easier to hide — topass off as coincidence or accident or a trick of the sight— but Blackwhip is obviously a whole new quirk that has nothing to do with super strength."

"I—"

"I know you've been in contact with Bakugou."

Izuku freezes, his jaw staying open, the statement completely unexpected.

"What?"

"I checked surveillance and the Bakugou blob stayed inside the school for a good two hours at least. Not an in-and-out kind of job. I've also gotten wind that you were awake that night. You talked to him, right?"

"I thought—"

"We found Bakugou's phone too —confiscated by the Hassaikai. His only contact is 'Deku'."

Sensei holds out said scuffed familiar flip phone. Izuku takes it and opens *Telegram*. It's true. Kacchan's only contact is Deku. Thirty unread messages. The ones Izuku had spammed throughout these few days thinking, hoping Kacchan may still have his phone, and the single message he'd sent the night before the raid.

Hope you're doing okay, he'd written. Meanwhile, Kacchan had been getting tortured. What a joke. Izuku gives Sensei the phone back, is so exhausted by … everything he can't even muster up the energy to feel scared or guilty.

Sensei seems to have picked up on this—doesn't press for an emotive reaction. "How long were you in contact?"

"Since that day he came to see me. His original plan was what we told you happened. I happened to be awake and intercepted him."

Sensei sucks in a breath, leans into his seat, staring out the car's front window at the night's sky. Neither of them looks at each other. Izuku focuses on the individual flecks of dust he can see floating thanks to the yellow reading light.

"How… did he seem?"

Izuku feels a flicker of irritation. "Smaller, paler. He passed out when I pinned him down because I thought he was an intruder, then later on he almost passed out again when I held his ankle. He said sorry for the bullying. Even used my real name once—he hasn't done that in over a decade." He doesn't mention the letters, wanting to keep his own to himself and protect whatever was said in Kirishima and Todoroki's.

"Any clue as to where he was staying?"

"Only thing he said was that it was safe."

"Right…And you went to Tsukauchi instead of me…" It's low, like he's not addressing Izuku at all. "You don't trust me one bit, huh." Neither a question nor an accusation, rather an observation.

Well, choosing Tsukauchi was a lot more complicated than that, and "not one bit" is taking it a little far but… Izuku says nothing.

"I messed up pretty bad." This is weird. Izuku is not used to Sensei being vulnerable. Thirty-one never seems like a young age to someone as young as Izuku, but when he considers that All Might debuted before Sensei was even born, it offers a whole different perspective.

“With you.”

“With Kacchan,” Izuku corrects.

“With both of you. I assumed what was best for you instead of listening to what you were asking me and burdened you with feeling like you caused Bakugou’s dream to be cut short, and with Bakugou… I’m too much of a coward to count the mistakes.”

Again, Izuku says nothing. He’d juggled with the blame for a long time while talking to his therapist, going back and forth and left and right. One day he felt like he was the one who ruined everything, one day it was Aizawa-sensei who’d taken things too far too fast, one day Kacchan’s parents were to blame for forcing Kacchan to (horribly) raise himself.

But at the end of the day, when it came to Kacchan’s expulsion as an isolated incident, the one most at fault was well, Kacchan himself. *I made my own bed,* he’d said. Expelling him wasn’t even that bad of an idea in concept, maybe in another world things would have gone right and Kacchan would have just bounced back as Aizawa-sensei expected. All the external factors at play stopped that from happening.

The sports festival where Kacchan’s attitude was demonized despite his great drive to win and skills to back it up for the sake of building a narrative where the arrogant villainous student was punished— that got the ball rolling. The expulsion story getting leaked added the traction, and the League pouncing on the chance kicked the ball home. Kacchan’s absent, years-neglectful parents, and UA’s lack of care for security measures made up the field for the entire play. Bit by bit, the small amounts of indifference that, had they happened by themselves may have made no difference, piled up and combined to allow the kidnapping to go without a hitch. And now Kacchan had been knocked over and over like bowling pins hit by back-to-back strikes.

“Do you still blame yourself?”

“…Not for him getting expelled no,” Izuku says. The answer might have been different two or three weeks ago, but he’s come to terms now with the fact that the only thing he’d done was tell the truth. What had happened afterward was out of his jurisdiction. Iyashi-san insisted he understood that. Kacchan himself saying so helped a lot with killing that chunk of self-blame.

But even though he knows it’s illogical, one thing he’ll always blame

himself for is not breaking down Kacchan's door that first time he showed up to talk after the expulsion and got no reply. He should've dragged Kacchan out of that house whether Kacchan's pride wanted it or not. And now, considering what he's found out and what happened at the Hassaikai, he'll always blame himself for not getting there fast enough, for not rescuing Eri, or perhaps for letting Kacchan go that November night in the first place.

"That's good."

The juice pouch is almost finished now. It crinkles as Izuku drinks the last of it.

"He thinks he's irredeemable."

Nemoto >> Do you hate yourself?

Bakugou >> What the fuck

Nemoto >> Do you hate yourself?

Bakugou >> Yes.

Nemoto >> "You don't think you deserve to be a hero. You think no one else thinks you deserve to be a hero. Yet you still crave heroism regardless. You've acted as a vigilante even when it was none of your business—

Bakugou >> I happened to be there—!

Nemoto >> You convince yourself you just happened to be there, but you know that's not the full story. You seek situations where you can get to be heroic to feel better about yourself. Despite the fact that everyone turned their backs on you and labeled you a monster you refuse to see the truth and accept that they're right. Deep down you know you're cut out to be a villain and have the fighting instincts of one, but you refuse to stoop to that level out of worthless pride. Instead, you cling to pathetic dreams of heroics both you and everyone around you knows are unattainable. Else, you would've kept your head down like everyone else at that store. Without heroics you're an empty shell, and you were never heroic in the first place. You're easy enough to read. I know everything about you. No one in your old life is ever going to accept you for who you are. So give in and make yourself useful in a new place —i n one where your kind belongs.

It rings in Izuku's head, this. Such a simple statement. The one-word answer.

Nemoto >> Do you hate yourself?

Bakugou >> Yes.

"They've made sure he thinks that," Izuku mumbles, staring blankly at the dust.

"I did too. I gave up on him too."

Sensei had said on their very first day he only expelled the students without any potential at all —even the tiniest bit would be enough to keep you there, he'd said. If you got expelled, it told you that to Sensei, you were worth nothing. Maybe Sensei only presented his expulsion tactics that way and the way he thought about them was different, but Kacchan had never had the chance to understand that.

A sigh. "What will it take to get you to trust me, Midoriya? Because I don't think you ever have, not even before everything."

"I don't know," Izuku says honestly. He has a hard time trusting people in general, and the sense of betrayal he'd felt from Aizawa-sensei isn't an emotion one can describe with ease. It's not just a matter of mistrust. Everything that's happened to Kacchan has caused a permanent rift. You can't close a hundred meter wide thousand meter deep crack in the earth. You can't glue those sides back together. The only thing you can do is build bridges over it, and whether those bridges are flimsy, rope and plank improvised things you never feel safe crossing, or proper, steel boned and concrete covered roads that make you forget the rift is even there, that —he supposes— depends on you, and the other person.

"To be honest, what's happened —what's happening to Bakugou right now terrifies me." The admission makes Izuku's stomach swoop. He blinks away images of Eri's room and her blood-stained walls. Somehow, hearing it from an adult makes it twice as real.

"He had to k-kill someone, Sensei." Izuku's voice cracks.

"…He did. And the thought that it could happen again, to Bakugou, or to any of you kids— that terrifies me even more. I care about all of you more than I ever expected to. I want to care *for* you. And if there isn't trust there I can't do that."

“Yeah,” Izuku says more to feed the conversation and urge Sensei to keep going than anything.

“I know I messed up with Bakugou. I don’t want a repeat.”

“Yeah.”

“And I told you before the raid, that with all your rule-breaking, you were going to have to earn my trust back while doing things the proper way. I should’ve added that I want to earn your trust back too.”

It’s a two-way street. Can’t build a bridge if one side of the rift refuses the other.

“Let’s start heading back.”

They do. It’s cold even through Izuku’s puffer jacket. He follows Sensei, trailing behind him on the stoned path to the dorm complex. He wonders if Kacchan is cold right now, wherever he is. Sensei stops some ways short of Heights Alliance.

“I’m sorry, Midoriya.” At this, Izuku gapes. This whole conversation has been a twilight-zone ordeal, but this takes the cake. His eyes tingle and he reaches into his pockets for the tissues he always keeps in there. “I’ll try to be a better teacher for all of you. Will you give me that chance?”

Will you trust me?

“You should save that apology for Kacchan, but yeah. I will.”

His voice wobbles mid-way through and he starts crying in earnest. Aizawa is surprised but doesn’t say anything, just reaches out his gloved hand to ruffle Izuku’s curls the way his mom and All Might always do. Without thinking, Izuku hugs him. It’s awkward because neither of them seems to be used to physical contact, but it’s a nice closer to their little tell-all.

“It sucks really bad—” he cries into Sensei’s scarf, his vocabulary degrading the way it tends to degrade when he’s imitating Kacchan mid-fight. “It’s so unfair to him. Bad things keep happening and he thinks it’s all some sort of karma and he lost all that blood again. And Eri-chan— I’m always too late to save them. Either too late, or I pass up the chance at all. I hate it so much. I hate this! All I wanted was for us to be friends again and be heroes together like we used to talk

about when we were little and—

Once his crying is satiated and he feels thoroughly embarrassed, they break up the hug and walk the rest of the way to the dorms. Right as Izuku is about to disappear through Heights Alliance's door, Sensei, now back to his usual demeanor (which Izuku prefers to twilight zone vulnerable Sensei any day of the week) calls out to him.

“You, me, and All Might are having a talk tomorrow.” Izuku pauses, shocked. “Don’t think for a second that I’m going to let that black lighting incident go undressed, or not asking you why this quirk you only ‘manifested’ around the time of All Might’s decline is so similar to his, or why you two are always sneaking around together, or why that report I got from Tsukauchi has huge sections blanked out and edited away and missing—”

(The next day, All Might agrees and they tell Sensei everything about One for All.)

Chapter End Notes

- i did make that HPSC representative the conflict driver. the HPSC is kinda more openly dirty among heroes here compared to canon. i doubt people would have these kinds of conflicts IRL, or talk all accusatory the way everyone here talks, but hey, they just failed a mission, everyone's feeling like shit, everyone's trying to shift the blame, throw shots at someone else to distract themselves from their own mistakes, it's a tense situation. for the sake of drama and fun story, ill make them act however i want lmaoo
- i debated for a long time whether to have nemoto actually die or just stay comatose. i figured eh, might aswell take that leap and kill him. there have been myriads of head injuries in this fic, and frankly hitting someone in the head is so good for taking them out specifically because it could severely injure and or kill them. even small concussions can leave permanent brain damage, and brain damage is shit. katsuki has hit people in the head before and got off scot-free, i say no more because I'm mean.
- very curious what people are gonna think of aizawa here, very very curious
- next chapters are gonna be katsuki focused yup
- i can't be the only one who's noticed a severe lack of katsuki-focused long fics and in-canon universe AUs? we do have some amazing stuff, but compared to the sheer volume of fics with Midoriya as the main character, it's very little. I'm of course

grateful for everything we DO have, and I like Midoriya-centric fics too, but as a Katsuki lover, I can't help but be hungry for more lmao. I gotta learn how to juggle my time better so I can write more of the ideas I have cooking up alongside slope
- i always felt kinda bad that aizawa probably got a shitty letter like everyone else to find out about OFA, especially in canon where he literally got permanently mutilated to help everyone fight. he deserves more respect than that. it's also lowkey manipulative and isolating that izuku was not allowed to tell anyone about OFA of his own volition, and having zero support for a long time for sure contributed to his current need for self-isolation. katsuki may be a piece of shit with his own faults in regards to izuku's mentality, but having a fresh perspective on the whole OFA thing and having someone out there willing to take some pressure off Deku is huge. not that I'm one of those all might is everything that's wrong with the world people, because i fucking love all might, but the way he went about training izuku in canon rubs me the wrong way a lot of the time and i think HK meant for it to do that.
- 飛(tobi- fly/flying) 鳥 (tori- bird) 藍 (ai- indigo) standard disclaimer that i am not Japanese, use a dictionary for these names and am always 100% open to any advice from Japanese or Japanese speaking readers

Chapter 20: Lost in a circle

Chapter Summary

a few things are addressed (and many more are not)

(mentions of the happenings of previous chapters, everyone feeling very crappy mentally)

Chapter Notes

okay hi

1) im so sorry for leaving 90% of the comments on last chapter unreplied to. this week has been so busy for me, from going to the beach, to family visiting, to a general shit physical health state on my end, so I haven't had the time of the mental capacity to do much surrounding the fic but editing the new chapter, so yeah. every comment on last chapter legit made my day,and the response was mind blowing. rest assured i read everything, and i loved seeing the variety of opinion. the whole point was that no one, not even the HPSC guy was 100% wrong in that situation, and how wrong you deemed it depended on you, and I think I did that pretty well
2) this chapter took a lot out of me mentally. i pretty much rewrote the whole thing and I'm still not satisfied with it. supernatural elements in this and i hope the explanation makes at least somewhat sense.

my brain is... shit today wow

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Katsuki was missing. That's the conclusion Koharu came to when it had been a full forty-eight hours since he'd left for the library and never come back. A night she could pass off as chance, a day was strange but not all that suspicious (she'd been quite lenient with Katsuki's non-existent curfews, and she'd never policed his actions). Two full days were a different story and he hadn't even told her. It crossed her mind briefly that he may have decided to upend their setup and simply leave, but such a thing wouldn't align with the Katsuki she'd come to know and his intense dedication. She considered herself high enough on his interest list to be granted a warning in advance were he to choose to leave, and she'd not gotten

even a peep.

The morning of the third day she hadn't opened up the shop, instead getting ready and dressed within five or so minutes to walk to this library Katsuki owed books to. She was greeted by a stout, stern clerk with wisps of snow-white hair and a sour expression trying very hard to morph itself into something friendly. She asked if a young woman with glasses and a memory quirk (this is as far as Katsuki's clipped descriptions could aid her) worked there and the man grumbled directions to the library's section Q.

Said young woman sat at her desk, enthralled by some paperback book, fantasy, likely. She was startled when Koharu knocked on her desk, rushing to hide the book and appear composed and attentive. "Hello, how may I help you?" she greeted on autopilot. What was her name? Rika, or something like that?

"Has a boy of average height and build with pale hair and red eyes been by here?" Koharu chose an indirect approach, looking to gauge out how much she knew and didn't know —how much she was willing to divulge.

The girl narrowed her eyes, in recognition and doubt. "Ma'am, I can't share that kind of information. May I ask why you want to know?"

Convinced this was the right person, she said, "I'm Katsuki's… grandmother. He lives with me and hasn't come home since he left to bring some books he needed to replace over here. Did you ever see him?"

"Katsuki… you mean Bakugou-kun? You're his gran? Why haven't you told the authorities he's alive then?" she at the same time perked up and dimmed.

"It's complicated. His relationship with his parents wasn't the best."

"I gathered that but if you're his gran, isn't one of them your kid? Talk a little, sort stuff out."

She sighed, regretting the lie. "Could you please just tell me if he's been here or not?"

"He hasn't shown up," the woman told her after a good thirty seconds of staring, and that seedling of worry turned into a sprout. So he'd never even made it to his destination?

Koharu thanked the concerned woman and left the library empty-handed, a dreary mood overtaking her. At home Katsuki's absence was so noticeable she couldn't bring herself to open the shop— the shelves disarranged and the atmosphere depressing without him there. Come noon Katsuki's, or well, their cat walked his way to the kitchen and pawed at the bottoms of the cupboards, meowing loudly and demanding food. Koharu gave him some, but he stared at it then her in discontent, as if the fact that she was not Katsuki caused him great inconvenience. He had not more than two bites of the food before he gave up on it, trotting to Katsuki's room and plopping himself down on the empty, unaired futon to signal that it was Katsuki or nothing.

"I know," she said. "I'm worried about him too."

A call came that afternoon. She rushed to get it, hopes of it being Katsuki cutting themselves short as soon as the voice over the line was revealed to be feminine. "Yes?" she snapped, perhaps a little harshly.

It was Aoi, delivering news from the tasks Koharu had assigned her. She also delivered finalized analysis for Katsuki's check-up— the one he'd completed the morning before he'd disappeared, and her, "I have no idea how that kid even functions, auntie," wasn't news she wanted to hear.

Katsuki needed to come back, and it needed to be fast. The more hours trickled by, the more dreadful she felt. Katsuki had a track record blemished to high heavens. What if he'd randomly passed out? What if he'd been run over? What if he was injured? What if he was dead? Why wasn't he calling her and why had she been stupid enough not to write down his phone number?

The next, fourth day was spent contemplating these what-ifs as she swept the streets of the path from the shop to the library to ask any passers-by if they'd seen anything, noticed anything amiss. She disguised herself with sunglasses and a trench coat and hat so outside her usual style Katsuki would have burst out laughing, asked the same people multiple times wearing different outfits and at different times of day, yet the answer was always the same: "I haven't seen a thing."

Whether this was truth or people following the unwritten codes of shadier areas dictating you had to pretend you couldn't see or hear lest you wanted to get involved, she could never know. Regardless, the attempt was a failure, and once the sun had well set and she returned to her empty home, she resigned herself to the simple fact that she could not find Katsuki on her own, and she needed to declare

him missing.

If such a thing was even possible for a person already dead, she had no idea. What would she tell the police? She mulled the story over. Law enforcement were far from her favorite people in the world, and there was no guarantee that they'd believe her when she had no concrete proof of his stay short of her word and any locks of hair fallen in his bedroom. But she didn't mind the legal consequences of having taken in a legally dead child with no one's permission as long as she got to find Katsuki, so she'd written down all the necessary things for a missing person's report, and fallen to restless sleep in order to wake up early and deliver the request to the police the next day.

❖❖❖

She doesn't wake up early. The stress made her sleep in. It's half-past nine or so am when she does wake up, and an hour more was taken up by getting the household, shop, and her papers in order. She's preparing to leave, fixing up the front counter, when the object of her grievance stumbles through the door like something possessed, looking tired enough to sleep for a year, dressed in a flowing dark outfit she'd never before seen, paler than usual in the face and holding a ball of blankets in his arms. She gapes, says "What is going—Katsuki?!" with a trembling voice, and receives hiccups and sobs in reply. He falls against the doorframe, mumbles something about home. The small splash of liquid relief his reappearance drops on her festival pyre's worth of worries evaporates without use.

"She's got a fever," is the second thing Katsuki says, pointing to the bundle of blankets on the floor she realizes is a little girl.

"Katsuki… where have you been? Why haven't you called?! Who even is she?!" she asks as she struggles to crouch near the girl, who, true to word, appears flushed and agitated even as she sleeps.

Katsuki meets her eyes when he speaks and his face almost makes her recoil, colored corpse gray, thin, pinkish lines spreading from the corners of his eyes like the rays a child would draw on a circle sun, said eyes so murky and wet it would be pushing it to call them red.

"Did a lot of… bad things," he manages, "Hurt people."

"Who hurt who?"

"Bootlicker bitch and purple collar and bird lady—" He's incoherent,

and the more he goes on the more stressed she gets. Her chest is tight, every breath feels short and lacking.

“Katsuki—” A particularly large sob. “You’re… not okay but please, try to calm down. Tell me what happened from the top.”

“It happened again—”

“What happened again?”

“*Villains*,” he says and her heart skips a beat. “I don’t fucking know. Some bitch Yakuza kidnapped me and put me in a lab *again*. Fucking *again*! Aren’t they tired?! Why the fuck do they care about me? I’m a normal fucking guy— not some magic gunniea pig *freakshow*. Fucking bullshit—”

The amount of fucks in that single string of sentences almost distracts her from the horrific revelation.

“The kid is six, has some sort of rewinding quirk that only works on living stuff and not through gloves. She’s ass at controlling it. The Yakuza fucker experimented on her too so I fucking kidnapped her. I don’t know. I don’t even fucking know. I think I killed like three people. Fucking stupid— Help her or something!”

“What about your injuries?”

“Who gives a shit? Waiting a little won’t make a difference. I’m a goddamn corpse—”

“Katsuki… try to calm down. You’re not making any sense”

“—I am though.” He puts two fingers in the joint of his neck, where one would look for a pulse. “I’ve been dead for like an hour.”

“What?!”

“Yeah. I can’t fucking die apparently.” He laughs through his tears, though he doesn’t sound very happy. “It was wild. Overhaul got rid of my lungs and I still… beat his ass… fuck.”

“Boy—”

“Just go help her, please. I’ll get my clothes ready for a shower. D’you have that defibrilator?”

He’s making no sense at all but Koharu has no choice short of having a

fight with him while he's obviously distressed, so she helps the girl first. She does a provisional check of her vitals, which all seem okay, then takes her into the bathroom. Runs a bath for her and splashes a bit of the blood she got from Aoi inside. The red right away blends with the water and disappears. Her niece's quirk gives her blood healing properties not unlike those of Ambrosia, though they are less potent and only work when the blood is mixed into water, effectively turning it into healing water.

The girl is pale herself, too warm to the touch, and caked in some places with blood and dirt. Her hair is so matted it takes a lot of brushing for the comb to run through smoothly, and under her bandages are neat, clinical scars reminiscent of the ones Katsuki had had on his legs those months back. The thought makes her queasy, and she focuses on getting the girl cleaned. She doesn't have any major fresh injuries outside slight bruising and cuts on her soles for her feet likely from running around barefoot. The whole process takes something like forty-five minutes, and the girl must be tired beyond belief because she never stirs at any point. The bathtub water is an ugly, murky brown by the end. Once the girl is clean, her injuries are newly, properly bandaged, her hair is tied up, and she's dressed in a too big nightdress Koharu had bought for herself years ago and never worn, Koharu leaves her in one of the patient rooms after refitting her gloves and hooking her up to an IV.

She'd instructed Katsuki to take a bath in the quirked water she'd prepared in the meantime. In the bathroom, there are bits of crusted blood on the tiles, the clothes the boy discarded are very stained now that they're inside out, one pile of indecipherable rags appearing a nasty rust color. Katsuki's head peeks from the bathtub, and when she gets closer she finds the water inside swirling with red. Katsuki looks small in the water, and, in some places, the usual burn scars on his arms have disappeared in thick rings, replaced by smooth skin or scars of a different design. He's lined with rows of the same pinkish cuts on his face, as if someone had sliced him into chunks and put him back together.

"Katsuki?" she asks, receiving no response from the boy. His eyes are closed as he's leaning against the porcelain. He isn't breathing at all. *"Katsuki?!"* she asks again, louder, shaking his shoulder and making the dirty water splash. He's colder to the touch than he should be, and his skin is a chilly, ice blue. She looks to the source of the blood, a wound on his calf, pulls the leg out of the water to inspect, and feels the world try to topple as she attempts to maintain composure.

That's a *bullet wound.* It's left shredded muscle and bone shards in its wake, the corners of it curling and leaking puss. She hisses— tries to get Katsuki to wake up again— no response. She feels for a pulse and finds none. He's dead. He's actually dead. She'd thought he'd been exaggerating earlier, but he's dead and if his previous statement is to be believed, he's been dead for something like two hours. She feels like passing out herself. It's like the first time at the phone booth, the bloodied water, and everything. The only thing missing is a flood of rain.

And this time, there's no way she can fix him herself.

❖❖❖

Velvet drapes, rich, dark chocolate, hang from each corner of the room's leftmost wall, drawn so the only thing filtering the cool outside light is the sheer, snow-colored curtain behind them. Koharu sits on the little black couch right in front of the window, alternating between peeking at the hospital's back garden, covered in thin layers of frost, and watching for any signs of Katsuki waking up. She'd asked for a room that looked as un-hospital-like as possible, and the room she got, fit with walls upholstered in diamond-patterned cream leather and built-in shelves of storage made of smooth mahogany, very much fits the bill.

The only thing hospital like in the room is the bed itself, a standard-issue thing newly painted and placed in the center. Machines beep as they should. The clock ticks without care. It's both boring and nerve-wracking to wait, so she turns to the window again, sweeps part of the sheer curtain to the side, and counts all the people in the courtyard.

She called Aoi and told her to use the emergency passage from their family hospital to the shop. Her niece's giddy demeanor melted off her when she found the mess in the bathroom. "Why is your assistant thirteen and why does he look like he's survived a zombie apocalypse?!" she asked with a green expression as she helped move Katsuki onto the stretcher. When she looked at him closer and realized he wasn't breathing, the tone of her voice laced itself with panic. "I'm pretty sure he's dead, auntie."

"I know that—"

"Why didn't you call sooner?!"

"I was busy with the other one." She'd been stupid and naive. Perhaps too trusting.

“There’s another one?!”

“Seems so— you’re young, put your back into it,” she scolds as they roll the wheeled stretcher.

“How long has he been like this—”

“I’d say two hours—”

“Two fricking hours?! There’s no way he’s not brain dead.”

“It’s happened before and he was resuscitated fine,” she says, irritated, as they moved through the hospital’s private ward, marble tiled hallways barren of people.

“It’s happened before?! Where did you even find him?! How did this even happen?! Did you pick him off the streets, auntie?!”

“Pretty much.”

They loitered in the waiting room for hours as Katsuki went through surgery, the procedure taking longer than it should have because Katsuki’s metaphysical… issues mandated the use of special equipment. Haruki and her nephew performed the operation themselves, because Katsuki also had the not so little problem of his volatile privacy, and the last thing they needed was an information leak, especially, considering all the villains salivating at the thought of him. She and Haruki may be the first to throw each other under the bus around family, but when it’s them against the world, he’s had her back for something like three-fifths of a century.

She tapped chairs and counted tiles as she waited. A few other patients, haughty rich people, came and went. Aoi did so too, bringing her water and an onigiri and keeping her company.

“You look pretty frail yourself,” she said around two hours of waiting in. “I heard from gramps that you—”

“I’ll be fine. It’s nothing new,” Koharu replied, folding up the onigiri wrapper to dispose of it neatly. “The stress of him being missing has made things worse— this isn’t usual.”

“Made things worse, huh... About that, if he was missing for five days, why didn’t you call the cops?”

“I was going to today— he showed up on his own.”

“No. I mean sooner.”

“I was hoping I wouldn’t need to. You must’ve realized by now, but he’s the Katsuki who was on the news some time ago.”

She choked on the bit of burger she’d been eating. “As in, Bakugou Katsuki? That kid who got expelled from UA for being super violent and ended up getting kidnapped by the League of Villains? That Bakugou Katsuki?”

Koharu nodded.

“I guess I was too distracted by the fact that he was… dead to notice. And to begin with, didn’t the police say he died?”

“They’ve got no idea what they’re talking about. They said that because they must’ve been too lazy to find him.”

“Wow.”

“I’m sure you know I’m telling you this in confidence,” she said evenly, leaving no room for arguments. “There can’t be any rumors, even among the family.”

Aoi nodded, made a face to tell her she was intelligent enough to gather that on her own. “And Mera… if he asks you for a description of my assistant again tell him something completely wrong. Katsuki gets targeted because there are rumors around that he can touch quirks and the league has a bounty on him. If people figure out Katsuki and my assistant are one and the same the harassment will only get worse. So if you can, feed the rumor mill some lies—”

Haruki and his son left the operation room after three hours off the clock, exhausted but announcing Katsuki stable.

“Ko… that boy might be the first and only person on earth who’s come back to life from brain death multiple times,” Haruki told her as he wiped the sweat from his brow. “I scarcely believe he’s human.”

She’d helped move him to his room, relieved at his cleaner, healthier appearance, at the regular rise and fall of his chest, and used the length of two days it was estimated to take him to wake up to move the shop from Tokyo to Sapporo. It had been a good thing too, she’d been leaving the area with the door packed up right as a gaggle of policemen was setting up warning tapes. Not today, she thought to herself.

The flight was short of two hours and lacking any secondary stops, but it still left her exhausted. Sapporo’s perpetually freezing air and too sparse

daylight hours didn't help. She'd struggled through fixing everything, fed Satsu, and checked on Eri, still passed out, then crossed the passage from the shop to hospital again, spoke to Haruki ("That boy has chemical imbalances for days," he told her, "I gave his anonymous blood test results to one of the top psychiatrists here and we've got him on a few anxiety medications based on their recommendations. If he should stay on them depends on how his body will react when he wakes up.") then plopped herself on the couch, and kept watch until she fell asleep.

She gets a little lost in the process, lost in her own head, enough that a good quarter-hour slips by her without her realizing, and when she's turned back around, she finds Katsuki upright on the bed, half laying half sitting, looking around the room in bewilderment and confusion. He looks so young, covered in blankets and attached to a dozen tubes, lost in the white of the sheets.

"Hi," he says.

"Katsuki…"

She's never seen him cry this often, hands coming up to rub at his face furiously. Koharu stands up to drop a box of tissues by his bedside, and when he reaches for them the wires on his arm move with him, creating this impression of a living mannequin on strings.

"Sorry," he says and blows his nose, touches his chest with his free hand, as if to check that it's there.

"For what?" she asks.

His mouth opens and closes. He says nothing. Minutes trickle by in silence until the redness at his eyes has all but gone.

"You took me to a hospital."

"Mhm. I could have defibrillated you at the shop but I didn't have the tools to keep you alive after. If I had more Ambrosia it might've worked out, but you'd lost too much blood and that bullet hole needed proper surgery."

He takes a deep breath, asks: "When am I going to prison?" with a completely serious face.

"...Never? You're a patient."

"I'm not going to prison?" he squints at her like she's telling him

something outrageous.

“No? Why would you?”

“A couple counts of battery and attempted murder, kidnapping, blackmailing, impersonating other people, defamation, exploding private property, shooting a bitch, refusing to cooperate with authorities, theft, dunno if getting rid of quirks without consent is illegal and I stabbed flower head too—”

“Katsuki… you said the yakuza kidnapped *you*. When did you do all that?”

“Most of it when I was trying to get out.”

“Then it’s self-defense.”

“Pretty sure you wouldn’t be saying that if you’d seen the back of Nemo’s head after I was done with it. Was a mashed potato in my nightmare.” Katsuki looks down at his duvet, blinks. He’s so level it seems odd to Koharu, and she’s got a feeling that anxiety medication her brother mentioned is the culprit. “Left a lot of DNA down there. The cops gotta know it was me. So why haven’t they come yet?”

“No one knows you’re here besides a few members of my family.”

“Right… that… makes sense… what about the kid?”

“She’s fine. Was sleeping when I left.” She’s a good kid, Eri is. Koharu hadn’t managed to get anything out of her words wise outside her own name and an inquiry on Katsuki’s status, but she slept as she should, and seemed to be getting more comfortable around the shop. It was a struggle to get her to eat, and she avoided Satsu like the plague, unsure of how to handle an animal she’d never seen before that was as good as her size and very eager to play, but otherwise, things were okay. Her fever dropped in hours and her quirk has been stable since. She spends most of her time in bed under Koharu’s orders, and it’s scary how quick she is to obey without complaint.

“…Good…” He pinches the bridge of his nose with two fingers and lets out a groan. “I…feel like I…got run over by a train multiple times.”

“You did *die* multiple times,” she says with a grimace as she watches him struggle to shift himself backward and lay against the pillows.

“I guess I did… do that.”

She frowns. “I’ll call up your doctor, alright?” The word makes him tense, his hand clutching at his cover. “That’s my brother. This is his place if you’re wondering— the hospital. He helped heal you the first time too. He’s a loser but he can be useful when it really counts.”

“A loser?” he repeats, “A little childish for you, nah?”

“It is what it is.”

Haruki deems Katsuki too soon awoken for more checkups and orders up water and a smoothie for him. Katsuki follows instructions to a worrying tee, grumbling very little and staying quiet the rest of the time. Once Koharu has returned from making sure Eri is okay and he’s been awake the whole afternoon, they get to his room again and she starts telling him the facts.

“Your prognosis is quite questionable,” she admits. “You’d been doing a good job at getting your body back in to shape judging by the results from the checkup we did before… this… but even at that time there were some issues.”

He makes a face that urges her to continue.

“Some of your right thumb’s nerves aren’t connected to the rest of the hand. You’ll remember I told you back then as well, that it should be paralyzed. That thumb is not linked to your nervous system. Your brain shouldn’t be able to send signals to it. Your wrist also had nerves damaged from your suicide attempt—” He flinches. “That shouldn’t work either.”

As if to show her she’s lying, he flexes both the wrist and thumb. “They work though. They hurt a little but they’ve always worked.”

“It’s a theory I’d refused to entertain back then, but— could you describe what you meant by this ‘Overhaul’ ‘getting rid of your lungs’.”

The sheets make scratchy noises under his uncomfortable shifting, but soon he’s closed his eyes and resigned himself to having to speak. “Overhaul made this big ass spike, and it went here.” With his hand, he motions to the center of his chest. “About this big,” She feels herself blanch when he makes an uneven circle the size of a soup bowl with his fingers. “Went in from the back, clean through. I puked a little blood then it was all white right away, for a good two seconds. I

guess that's where I died. Shit was all dulled and echoing when I came back to the real world."

"And you're sure you died?"

"My heart was missing a chunk, healer hag. Yeah I'm sure."

"But you still had control of your body?"

"Yeah… I could walk and bend and shit, held up fine for a dude with half a spine. Hurt like hell but… it was a bit like after All For One stabbed me the first time."

The fact that this has happened so many times now he has incidents to reference is both disheartening and disturbing.

"Well, my theory is that your consciousness isn't attached to your body the way it's supposed to be."

"Stuck between where the quirks are visible and where everyone else is or some crap— isn't that what you also said the first time?"

"Yes, but even more extreme. I think your consciousness is independent of your body. Instead of the state of the body limiting the consciousness like usual, you're the opposite. Your body's a vessel and you can control every part regardless if your nervous system's fine or not."

He frowns, looks a little sick. "A bunch of crap is what. What's consciousness anyway?! If mine's detached, why doesn't it just fucking float away for good instead of sticking around when my physical body goes to shit?" The complaint has some implications she doesn't want to think about.

"According to my theory, your quirk factor is the bridge."

"What quirk factor?! I don't have any aura—"

"Not even in your blood?" Katsuki pauses, and she knows she'd been right in her assumption. "Your blood has quirk energy. The amount typical of very powerful quirk users— much more than someone with a non-blood-related quirk should have. You were so determined to fight against All For One's quirk, your quirk energy turned itself inwards and he moved your soul to the quirk energy plane instead. At the same time he was tugging out you were tugging in, and your loose quirk factor became the bridge."

Katsuki blinks at her, lips falling a little open. “All of this sounds like the ramblings of a dude on drugs, you realize that? This is the kind of shit I was saying to Crusty when I was counting holes in the wall to keep sane. There’s no way to scientifically prove the existence of a ”soul“, let alone that mine is detached or whatever.”

Koharu knows, and the scientist in her had been having mini-breakdowns at the ridiculous supernaturalness of the whole situation, at how little technical sense it made. “I know, but it’s the only answer I can think of. As long as you have quirk energy in your body your soul will be able to use it as it pleases, whether it’s supposed to work or not. I know for a fact quirk energy exists independent of the state of its original producer. My mother’s blood kept its quirked properties for years after she died. The energy takes much longer to dissipate than it takes a human to decompose.”

“Sure… let’s go with that…” he says, something part incredulous in his tone. “My blood does have a neon orange aura, and that shit’s way more explosive than it used to be, so the part about all my quirk energy being stuck in my blood instead of being emitted I can buy, but the rest…”

“Your state has aggravated the longer you stay in it. Your blood is more and more saturated with quirk energy and as a result, nitroglycerin, to make up for your soul getting more and more detached. I think that the more you interact with quirks and ‘spend time’ in that plane, the more your soul wants to stay there, and the harder your own quirk energy works to bring it back.”

“I could still feel my limbs when Overhaul cut them clean off but—”

A disk scratches in her mind, halting the conversation like a strike of lighting. “What do you mean *cut your limbs clean off?!”*

He pulls down the sleeves of his thick pajamas to point out the smooth skin of his hand stretching until the mid-forearm, then stopping as if chopped with a knife to morph into the scared skin she remembers healing. She’d thought upon first seeing it that it looked like someone had cut off the bottom part of Katsuki’s arm and replaced it with a version sent through repeated rounds of plastic surgery, and it dawns on her then that her initial judgment may have been more on the mark than she’d have liked it to be.

“He cut this part off and I could still kind of feel it. Thought it was some phantom limb scenario but I guess it was more literal. Good

thing I didn't move it. He'd have gotten high off realizing I could do that." He taps at the skin of his face with his fingertips, taps at the edges of his latest scars. "Don't remember if I could still see out of my eyes when he took them out—"

"*Took them out?!"* She's going to murder this Overhaul.

"I took his quirk out in return so it's fair—"

"He tortured you—!"

"And I tortured right back."

"You fought back to *defend yourself*."

"If that makes you feel better."

This is… very bad. She moves on before she explodes open by accident a can of worms that deserves far more care in its addressing than she'll be able to currently give.

"As for your physical injuries, you resuscitated easily like the first time but had so little in the way of blood it had to be all replaced. That bullet hole was ripe with bacteria and dirt, so it and a few other spots in your body got infected quickly after your circulatory system started working again. Your other injuries were minor, and you should be able to recover from the mild malnutrition in a few weeks."

They talk for a while longer, Katsuki giving her a few more gruesome details of the incident with the unfortunate ease of a practiced veteran.

Haruki soon comes to greet them, and he makes Katsuki do a variety of tests for his senses. They discover his better than normal hearing has worsened to the levels of a regular person, his taste buds are a little fried, and his touch receptors stunted. His eyesight is bad enough from a distance he'll need to start wearing glasses.

"This is what I meant by you slipping," she tells him when Haruki has gone. "Your sense of this world is dulling."

He says nothing for a long time. "You think if someone had drained all my blood my soul would finally kick it?" he asks, and she doesn't know the answer. "What if someone hit me with a bullet that gets rid of quirk energy?"

“Then you’d probably die for good. There’d be nothing connecting your soul to your body. You’d go to that white place you described.”

“Huh… fuck…” he says, a wistful look crossing his face.

“What is it?”

“Nothing… only thinking…” This thinking goes on for a while. “How long do you think I got until my quirk energy can’t keep up with my runaway consciousness anymore?”

“The highest quirk energy recorded in the country is All Might’s at 13’000 AP. Yours has gone from 9010 to 9340 in around three months.”

“So assuming the rate stays the same, something like two and a half years at most. No way I’m getting more quirk energy than All Might. My blood would be pure NG at that point.” The unfazed acceptance in his voice gives her the chills, and there’s an edge to it, like two years is too long to wait instead of not long enough.

“You’re not dying, Katsuki.”

“Well, no one’s letting me—”

“We’ll have found a way to fix you by then.”

“I ain’t fixable.”

“Katsuki…”

“I’m tired, healer hag,” he says, “I got a headache too. Wanna sleep.”

And he denies her every chance at conversation after that.

Tatami floors and warm wood walls and knick-knacks scattered all over, this is the strangest place Eri remembers being in.

She’d woken up alone in an unfamiliar room, looking for Kacchan but finding only screen panels and potted green stuff. She’d been too scared to move from her bed, her hair smelled of something sweet and pleasant that reminded her of mama, and the mattress was so soft. The bed in the basement had been soft too, but the sweetness of that room had been pungent and artificial, breathtaking in a bad way.

Though she felt miles better than the last time she remembered being

awake, fatigue still weighed her down, and the mattress was begging "you're safe—sleep in me more." So she'd closed her eyes and done just that.

Waking up the next time was scarier. Because she'd produced the courage to move into a half-sitting position, looked down from the bed that was far too high, and come face to face with a great big grey *thing*. The thing moved, wagged a tail, and Eri couldn't contain a small scream. She put hands over her mouth right away, attempting to silence any other noises, and watched as the thing purred and twirled on the floor, rubbing up against the wheels of the bed. She leaned her head closer and closer to the edge. It picked that exact time to fix her with a glare of piercing blue. She yelped and fell backward on the bed, curling around the covers

The room's walls slid open, and in walked an old lady with patterned dark clothes, glass on her face, and round golden eyes, their surroundings riddled with wrinkles.

"You awake, honey? Feeling okay?"

Words refused to come out of Eri's mouth, and the place closest to this room in appearance she remembered was pops' room, and while pops had never treated her badly, he'd been the one to assign Chisaki her main caretaker. Right then, she trusted no one but Kacchan. She gave a small nod to get the lady to back off.

"That's good. Your fever went down, but you were too fatigued to stay awake. I hope you don't mind that I cleaned you up a little."

She didn't really care. "K—kacchan?" she struggled to get out, hoping she'd angled the tone enough to appear questioning.

"…You want your mom?"

"No. I— Ka—kachuki?"

The old lady coughed a little. "Katsuki?" She gave big nods. "Does he let you call him Kacchan? That's so cute… Katsuki is... fine. A little banged up but he's been getting help. He'll be home in a few days more."

"No Kacchan?"

"Not for now no. I'll bring you some ice chips for your throat and something to eat, okay?

No way she was eating anything from a stranger.

“Katsuki lives with me. You’re ninety-nine point nine nine nine percent safe here.”

That was a little better. Still not in the trustworthy territory.

“What’s your name?”

She gulped.

“It’s not gonna hurt you to tell me…”

“Eri,” she breathed out and thought about how she never told it to Kacchan.

The granny left her alone after that, brought over a plate of various foods, and told her it would be best she stay in bed while she waited for Kacchan to wake up at the hospital. Eri listened, because she was kind of scared of granny despite how nice she seemed, there was nothing better to do, and the floor was dangerous, because that *thing* was down there, ready to pounce.

Going to the bathroom presented a problem, she could not get there without being intercepted by the big furry one the granny called murder. Why was he called murder? Did he murder kids like Eri? Did he eat them like monsters under beds? Something isn’t called murder for no reason.

She armed herself with a broomless broomstick every time she climbed off the bed to get to the pretty tiled bathroom, tiptoeing on the tatami and keeping close to walls, prepared to defend herself in case of a fur attack. When granny was home he mostly stuck by her, but when she wasn’t, he would watch Eri with— with *murderous* eyes that made her shiver.

That day it was getting back to her room that had been troublesome— she found the cat splat on the floor, in the middle of the hallway, like a pseudo traffic blocker of nightmares, scratching his ears with a lazy paw. Part of her felt challenged by the way he both teased and dismissed her, so instead of waiting for him to leave and sneak by as she’d done before, she jutted out her chin, straightened her back, and strutted into the hall like the most pretentious Yakuza she’d caught glimpses of would strut. Murder the cat stopped scratching his ear, seemed to measure her up.

“Oi, got something to say?” she dared, imitating the thugs of the basement with a bit of Kacchan sprinkled in as seasoning. He meowed as if to reply and how close the noise was almost made her want to turn tail, but Chisaki was much worse than this cat, and she was a brave girl. “Thought so, ya stupid furball whore.”

The cat did not like this, no it did not. It stood on its paws, reaching up to Eri’s elbows in height but seeming to tower further, and let off a hiss, his tail swinging back and forth. Eri braced herself, tightened her hold on her broomstick, so long it risked to trip her up, only for the cat to sneak up to her with near-silent steps and fall to the floor again at her feet, rubbing content against her too long polka-dotted nightgown. “Ya stupid furball whore?” He looked up and meowed, seemed to smile as if he liked her, and he was warm at her feet, his fur soft on her bare toes.

Curiosity was her main driver as she crouched down and put a trembling, gloved hand on him, patting gently. He leaned into her hand, meowed again. He *did* like her. All this time, he’d just wanted to be friends. A pang of sudden guilt overtook her. She kept patting him and whispered: “I’m sorry for calling you a whore. I’m a bad kid you see. I always make mistakes.” He did not care, he only seemed to care about getting petted, so Eri petted him. She petted him until the floor became uncomfortable, she started to feel drowsy again, and she had to rise to get back to bed.

When Satsu poised himself to jump up with her, she did not flinch away or stop him. Instead, she let him curl at the end of her bed, slipped under the covers, and ate a bit of this thing called “apple”, the crisp, fresh taste of it satisfying to her in a way food hadn’t been in a long time. Her following nap was nightmare-free.

Those next few days she spent exploring this strange house, marveling at the orderly rows of the room up front, huddling up with her blanket by the one floor to ceiling window of the living room, watching Satsu pick at his own food, running her hands along the holes of the lattice front panel of the closet door that belonged to Kacchan. It was a nice house, but so often empty, five days felt like years, and she worried for Kacchan, dreamed of Chisaki and his screams.

❖❖❖

Kacchan’s return isn’t the triumphant moment she expected. When he slips in through the door and ruffles her hair, her worries do not melt away like she daydreamed. Because Kacchan disappears again, first

into the bathroom then into his own bedroom, draws the door closed and doesn't say a single word.

"Why won't he come out?" she asks granny after the third day of shut doors, a day when she's feeling particularly brave.

Granny doesn't look up from the plates she's washing. "He's sleeping."

She asks again the next day and the answer is the same.

"Still?" she says, confused.

"Katsuki's been through a lot of things. He's exhausted."

"But…" she'd never heard of someone sleeping for four days straight, and by granny's demeanor, she doesn't buy her own argument either.

"Shall I cut you another apple?"

Even her newly declared favorite treat is not enough to distract her from her predicament.

Her nightmares get worse, and that night she wakes up drenched in sweat to find the bathroom light on and the bathroom occupied, Kacchan leaning by the toilet and retching, his back slightly in the glow of the above mirror lamp. Eri mouses back to her room and can no longer sleep, Satsu nowhere to be seen to ease her worries. She hears shifting from the next door over, then from the hall, quiet whispers, Kacchan's voice for the first time that week. The only word she can make out is *tired*. She's tense until she sees the bathroom light switched off —until shadows have crossed the halls and doors have been closed again.

Hers slides open and granny walks in. "Eri-chan, are you awake?"

She tries to fake sleep, but her eyes open without consent when she feels the bed dip. Granny's eyes are star flecked in the moonlight.

"Kacchan isn't okay," it slips from her, and so do the embarrassing tears. "What's wrong with him?"

Why won't he come out of his room? Why won't he eat at the table? Why does he sleep for days on end? Why is he only awake at the oddest hours, making himself sick? Why won't he talk to her?

"His… head is a little messy right now, among other things," says granny, pulling out a tissue from her pocket. Eri lets her wipe her

tears.

“Take me back to C-chisaki.” Granny’s hands freeze, blocking Eri’s eyesight with tissues.

“What?”

“I bring bad luck. He’s the only one who keeps me under control. Look how bad Kacchan got—”

The pressure on her face lifts and she opens her eyes to meet the older woman’s sad gaze. “It’s not your fault. I don’t know who Chisaki is but he’s a bad man. He’s an idiot. Katsuki isn’t this way because of you—”

“So why hasn’t he said a single word since he came back? Does he hate me?”

“No, no no. He asked about you right after he woke up. His general headspace isn’t good. It hasn’t been for a while. It’s got nothing to do with you.”

“But…”

“No more buts. And, Katsuki might not be okay now, but that doesn’t mean he’ll stay like this forever. I’ll do my best to make sure of it. For you too."

Huh. That's nice. "You're nice, granny." She swears the woman flushes, mutters something under her breath.

"Let's get you changed. I'll find another shirt. You'll get sick again if you go back to sleep like this." A sigh Eri can't decipher. "What am I going to do with you kids?"

Chapter End Notes

hope that was okay
1) this chapter addresses very little in regards to katsuki's mental state and that is on purpose. it's the angst fest I'm sorry but also not. itìs frustrating on purpose
2) i snuck in eri Satsu fluff you bet i did
3) the formatting might be a little confusing for this ngl
4) to the person who asked about katsuki having cavities, congrats you've found a plot hole. the hygienic implications of having zero hygiene facilities for upwards of a month are kind of teeth chattering, and i thought katsuki had suffered enough

without losing all his teeth and having like fleas and a dozen bugs and illnesses, so we're conveniently gonna ignore those lmao
5) to anyone who wants to make fanart, it's 100% allowed. so is stealing my ideas. it's a huge honor in fact. just send me a link of something so i can share the fanart in the notes. the only thing not allowed is reposting this onto another platform, like Wattpad or something. not that ill be able to do much if u do do that, but yeah, please don't
6) again curious to see reactions to this chapter
7) lots of people are hyped for possible kiri implications from the last chapter and he'll get his moment, i promise
8) i will once again restate that my brain is fried. i think I'm gonna come back to this tomorrow and wonder what the fuck i was on when I wrote it.
9) 40k+ hits you're all insane idk how to thank you
10) eri can't have spent half her life among yakuza without picking up some mobster speech patterns XD

Chapter 21: Breakthrough (?)

Chapter Summary

Intervention

(very very brief mentions of using prescription drugs wrong)

Chapter Notes

hii. i am still too busy. I'm posting this guy early because I won't be at home at all tomorrow. i swear time flies rlly fast these days. i hope everyone has been doing alright.

I'm kinda scared this chapter will come off as too therapy-ish/on the nose/straightforward, but i do think it's a necessary step, so yeah. here it is

hope you enjoy it

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Up

Wake up, Katsuki.

Blinking is harder than walking on a bed of nails, his eyelids so heavy they might as well be weighed by boulders. The room feels flooded by water, the light weighing on his skin. He puts his escaped foot back under the covers, wishing to melt away into nothing.

“Katsuki?”

There’s cold on his face. His window is open and he’s not the one who opened it. He needs to change his sheets. They’re scratchy and smell weird. He needs to do a lot of things. He doesn’t want to do any of them.

“Katsuki, I know you’re awake.”

He frowns, tries to roll over discretely so his face is stuffed into his pillow. It’s counterproductive— the feeling of suffocation makes him want to puke. His mouth is desert dry, his lips so chapped he’s scared to use his tongue to wet them.

“*What*—?” he says finally, giving in and flipping to face her, managing

to open half an eye. Healer hag is blurry in the sunlight, the brightness of her aura washing her actual body out.

“I need to talk to you,” she says.

“So talk.”

“Can you get up first?”

“No.”

“Katsuki…” That something in her voice that reads a lot like disappointment makes guilt churn in his gut, and he barely manages to open his eyes in full— push himself up and sit stiff on his futon.

“What do you want?” He hates every word he lets out of his mouth, knows he’s being a bratty little bitch.

Healer hag doesn’t reply. She digs through a pile of clothes in the corner for a floor pillow and sits down with some struggle. Now, they’re level. He doesn’t look at her. He can’t look at her.

“You can’t go on like this…”

“Like what?”

A flat stare, one betraying disbelief. At least it’s not pity. “You know what. It’s been six days and you’ve done nothing but sleep and go to the bathroom. You’ve had nothing to eat since the hospital. That’s not healthy.”

“…and?” Katsuki swallows and it tastes bad. The last time he’d been awake, he’d vomited all over the bathroom floor, and the aftermath of that has been washed out only badly. His skin is chalky, he can feel the oil on his scalp. He’s disgusting and he can’t even get himself to care. That’s the most disgusting part of everything.

“You aren’t wearing your glasses.” They’re collecting dust inside their case.

“Fuck them.”

Healer hag blinks, in frustration or something else. “Have you taken your meds?”

“Yup,” he says. Their red-capped screw bottle sits on his desk, too bright among papers and books and pens. He hadn’t wanted to at first,

then the little voice in his head whispered it would make no difference anyway, and they'd make sleeping easier. To show her, he reaches out for the bottle and throws it over.

"How many?"

His prescription said two at most, but two did nothing, so he took four and kept taking four each time. Four make him the tiniest bit drowsier. "Four."

"Total?"

"No, each day."

She flinches and Katsuki's guilt quadruples. Another mistake. There's no more room on the list. His bottle is quickly pocketed, and the irritation of having a personal item confiscated is split-second brief. Heh. He can't even get mad.

"Why would you take that many? Haven't we studied the dangers of not following prescriptions?"

"Didn't work," he justifies lamely. "Weren't doing shit."

"Then you should have told me! You might've needed something else! Didn't I tell you to report everything?"

He'd apologize but he isn't sorry, not really, and he doesn't want to become a liar on top of everything else.

"I'm taking you back to the hospital," she says after a very long pause, and the edges of Katsuki's world begin to blur, the hands under the duvet come to scratch at his bare ankles with unclipped nails.

"You can't."

"There's no other option."

"No, you—" His breath hitches midsentence. He thinks of metal walls. He looks at her and knows their relationship has hit its expiration date like his every relationship ever. Katsuki's the poison that spoils the food. He liked this food a little too much, so it's been ruined extra quickly. Of course, he'd grow unbearable eventually. Of course, she'd give up on him eventually too. "—don't take me back to the Doctor. If you're giving up, throw me out, but don't take me back. I don't want to go back. Not—"

A hand is at his shoulder. “Breathe. I’m not taking you to *that* Doctor,” she says in a tone laced with horror and disgust. “I’m not giving up either. I meant the hospital we were just at. You need to see a psychologist.”

“Why? So they can print me an official certificate to label me a nutcase? I already know that! I know I’m fucked!”

“You’re not—”

“And what am I supposed to tell them? *Hi, I’m Bakugou Katsuki that shitty motherfucker who’s such a piece of shit he can’t even die. I get shoved in rooms and picked apart a lot so now I’m even more fucked and useless than I was before. I abused my childhood friend for ten years, made my parents regret ever having me, and tortured a couple of people.’*?! You know what they’d tell me? *It’s okay sweetie,* then they’d pull you to the side somewhere I can’t hear and tell you *he’s too fucked we can’t fix him you’d better get him institutionalized*, that’s if they don’t call the cops straight up.”

“That’s not—”

“Cmon, healer hag. I’m an asshole, not stupid. We both know I couldn’t go to therapy even if shrinks did work. I’m legally dead. I have zero rights. Anyone could leak shit about me easily. There’s no way I could accept the risk of telling a stranger all this crap I’ve done. I had to take twenty breaks and throw up four times just while writing it out. I’d rather die than tell to some random. And I’d rather die than have this random call the cops or more villains on me.”

She bites her top lip and Katsuki knows that at the very least, the fact of his precocious status is a solid argument against getting a therapist.

“I’m not getting why you keep insisting you’ll be going to prison.”

“Because,” he says, his tone monotone. “I took off a guy’s quirk so violently he couldn’t even hold his own head up after, I made mashed potatoes of another, and I shot another twice and let her roll down five flights of stairs without looking back. That’s three counts of attempted murder, if not full-on murder. And that’s only part of it.”

“And did you throw the first hit in any of these incidents?”

He rakes his brain, scratches harder at the memories. “…No.”

“Then it’s self-defense. Katsuki… they tortured you. One of them *killed*

you. I won't let you feel guilty for this."

"I know the law. The court won't give a shit. They'd put me on the stand anyway, as they should," *and I'd ask straight up for a death penalty,* he thinks to himself, *though, never mind. They'd see I can't die by normal means and I'd become a lab rat for the third time. I can't have fucking anything.*

"And you'd be declared innocent."

"Maybe if I plead insanity."

She sighs harshly. *How long until she gets frustrated enough to hit me?* he wonders.

"We aren't getting anywhere."

"We won't until you admit to yourself that I'm an asshole—"

"I've never thought that—" she hisses.

"Bet you're thinking it now. You're thinking I'm an annoying burden. I know how this kind of shit works. You ain't the first—"

"*Never*—"

"Quit it," his room volume voice rises and rises until it cracks. "Quit it with the nice act. I know I cause problems. I know I'm not worth keeping around. You'll realize it too, like everyone else has."

"Who's everyone else?"

"My parents, the media, everyone at UA, Aizawa, fucking All Might, fuck, even Deku. You know how much of a shithead you need to be to get Deku to lose it?! You don't because you don't know Deku, but if you did, you'd know that it's *astronomically shitheaded*."

"What have these people said to you?"

"That they always knew I'd be a fuckup, that I should've never been born. That I'm a brute delinquent who gets off on hurting people weaker than me. The only people who Sensei expels are the ones with zero heroic potential, and guess what happened to me?! My hero potential is subzero." He taps at his chest. "There ain't a millimeter of good in me. I'm fucked up and I fuck up other people because that's all I'm capable of doing."

“Katsuki…” she whispers, “You can’t talk about yourself like this.”

“It’s the truth. There’s a reason I keep getting targeted. There’s a reason all these villains are telling me I’m just perfect for the job. Things don’t happen without meaning. They’re happening because I deserve them—”

“Stop. Don’t you dare say that again. You don’t deserve to get abused. Don’t you dare say that—”

“It is the fucking *truth*. I’m getting my dues—”

“You’re a normal kid, Katsuki—”

“That’s because the League fixed me! You didn’t know me before! I used to make Deku’s life hell in middle school, at the start of UA… I was so insecure that beating on him was *fun*.” In truth, he can’t remember if beating on Deku was fun as much as it was some misguided show of superiority. That time feels like it’s so far away, has been twisted so much by media and villains and his own nightmares that memories of it have mixed into a murky mess of truth and fabrication. “It made me feel good about myself. I wrecked his self-esteem. He couldn’t walk near me without flinching because I was his fucking abuser. Who knows how many times he went home to his stupid too nice mom who used to hug me when I was a kid and hide the traces of what I did to him, pretended he was fine because that’s the type of dumbass he is —the type of dumbass I helped create? How many times he did that while I felt all self-satisfied on my high horse? What kind of person am I, if I can’t take what I dish—”

“Middle school… Katsuki you were fourteen. You were stupid. You regret it.”

“Age doesn’t matter. I fucked Deku over anyway. Deku’s going to have to live with memories of a friendless abuse-filled childhood anyway. And sure I regretted it. Only after someone else laid out how shitty it was for me as they poked my skin off. Turns out what the Doctor did was great for me then. Since it made me realize I was a little bitch.”

“There are other ways of doing that, and none of these villains have ever had good intentions.”

“The results are good though, ain’t they? You’ve said so yourself, that 'I’ve changed' and that the me you’ve known is a 'good kid'.” He punctuates each outrageous statement with air quotes.

“I’ve never meant it in that way. You helped me even before anything had happened to you. These repeated kidnappings may have helped you realize you’d made mistakes, but they also swung you in the whole opposite direction. You have enough trauma for an entire country. You didn’t deserve that. Does it make sense to you, to teach a bully bullying is wrong by abusing them in return? Why is it okay when it’s you?”

“Killers can get killed by the state for killing. That’s the whole point of the death penalty.”

“Schoolyard bullying isn’t murder Katsuki.”

He scoffs. “Are we playing crime severity olympics now? Lucky for you, I’m a murderer too.”

“There’s such a thing as equal retribution,” she says firmly. “You got your punishment for being a bully, and that was getting expelled. That’s where the retribution should have ended were it equal—”

“Mhm, one expulsion versus a decade of pain… how fair.”

“—Everything after has nothing to do with what you have or haven’t done. No part of getting starved and treated as subhuman for over a month is the proper punishment for bullying. The villains aren’t right. They don’t care about this Deku or what he’s been through. They’re using him as a tool to manipulate you, taking your mistake and making it your entire identity. I wager this entire house that this Deku boy had nothing to do with anything that’s happened to you, nor would he approve of it. How is you getting traumatized helping either of you?!”

“So I should get off scot-free?”

“You didn’t get off scot-free. You got expelled and your dream was rendered as good as impossible. There’s no higher possible ‘scott’.”

“If I was serious about shit, I’d be back at UA serving Deku’s every whim. I didn’t make up for anything I did,” he argues.

“Because no one gave you the chance to,” she argues right back. “They decided it would be best for you two to stay apart and kicked you out upon finding out. If they wanted you two to improve your relationship, they’d have gone about things differently. You accepted your retribution in that regard. Maybe in another world, you might’ve been able to amend your mistake and repair the broken bond, but you

were never allowed to in this one. You look ill every time you so much as mention UA. Forcing you back there now, even if it's to make up for a fault of your own, is in my book cruel to an immeasurable degree. That side made their own mistakes."

"Deku didn't do shit—"

"I'm talking about the adults Katsuki. Your parents and your teachers. From what you've told me, they as good as abandoned you."

"I was a bad person."

"You were fifteen, sixteen at most. The life you've lived is so short in the larger scope of life. I'm four times your age, and I wouldn't recognize myself back then. People change."

He shakes his head. "Not me."

"Why not?"

"I still feel good hurting people, I'm still rude and mean and shitty."

"It's been three months, and what happened in the basement doesn't count. You were defending yourself."

"Well, no one thinks I can change. Not the villains, not the heroes, not my parents, not Sensei. Not even All Might or UA could salvage this trainwreck."

She looks at him sadly. "They never tried, Katsuki," and it knocks the wind right out of him. "Tell me, were you on any sort of warning from UA before you got expelled. Suspension notices, anything of the sort?"

Katsuki thinks back. "I'd get scolded once or twice for being too rude or childish, and they chained me up for the Sports Festival…"

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"And how long did it take for you to get expelled after the bullying came to light?"

"One… two hours," he says, memories of aching bones and torn costumes and the taste of disappointment swirling in his head.

"So until that point, the most they'd done was scold you, which means

they'd watched your behavior and never deemed it serious, which means what got you expelled was the things you did before even entering their institution, all within two hours. Would you say that's enough time for you to change?"

"I—"

"Or your parents. What did they do to help you change?"

"They weren't around much. Had lots of work." He's not sure why he's defending them. "They told me to 'fix my shit or I'd be in for it' and left for a two-month business trip."

"So they ran away. It sounds to me like everyone was always telling you you were wrong but never giving you the actual tools to get better."

"They don't owe me shit—"

"But they *do*. As parents and teachers, their *job* is to provide guidance and protection. They're supposed to be the people who teach you empathy and self-reflection. Even if we exclude your teacher, who has his own rights in deciding to expel you, your parents did very little for you. You didn't ask to be born, they *chose* to have you, and when you make that kind of decision, you need to be prepared to commit to your child. Never mind that they didn't care for your growth, they didn't even bother to keep you safe. And then they gave up on looking for you."

The hag and the old man never loved him enough for him to be a priority is what he hears, and it's not a pleasant thing to hear from someone else. He tries to change the subject. "Does that give me a tragic backstory? That my parents suck? My actions are still my own."

"It wasn't to say you had an excuse for behaving badly, it was to say that your parents have their own faults, and just because they decided you couldn't change doesn't mean that's an indisputable truth."

"But I *am* still the same as always—"

"*Stop*. Stop going in circles. This is a mean thing to say, but giving up and deciding you can't change is both the easiest and most painful option. Change isn't some linear thing. You need to stop thinking of it like that. You're already perfectly capable of being kind and thoughtful and good— I know that first hand, and becoming a better person is something you should be able to decide on your own terms.

This so-called change is hard because you've been told it's this impossible task— that line of thinking has made you stagnate."

He has nothing to say.

"You're stuck in this well full of self-hate, most of it undeserved, and you're in such a bad place mentally that it's easier for you to swim at the water's surface or fall under than crawl your way up to ground level. You don't deserve to stay drowning forever. That's a bunch of crap. You deserve to try your best to be happy."

That's *great.* That's some great idealistic naïve and flowery *bullshit.*

"I'm too tired to try," he confesses. "I want to die." and admitting it is like a weight lifted off his shoulders.

Healer hag sucks in a sharp breath, her voice wobbles. "Once you can find happiness in life again, you won't think that way anymore."

Sappy as shit.

"What if it feels like I never will? What if I'm living with a constant pull in the wrong direction?"

"Then— and this might be self-serving of me to ask— you have to take it step by step. You have to find something that makes you happy again. You have to open yourself up to both help and change."

My dream is already dead, he wants to say.

"I'm not going to pretend or predict that you'll ever be one hundred percent fine again. I'm not going to tell you how you should and shouldn't feel. I'm not going to tell you what you should and shouldn't change either. Some of those things are in your control, some others aren't. That's okay. You don't need to wipe yourself clean. You don't need to build a whole new person. You just have to give yourself a chance. You aren't tired of life, you're tired of *this* life."

He *is* tired. He's tired of constant nightmares, of ugly skin he can't bear to look at, of the floating disconnect, of his bouts of anxiety and control loss so horrible he can't remember what he does during them, of hating himself, of flinching and shaking and throwing up at things as dumb as porridge or gloves, of never being left alone. But, "It's the only life I got."

"It doesn't have to be."

He looks away, finds he can't agree with half her points. Sensei thought he was worthless as a hero, it's not Sensei's job to deal with that. He caused problems for other students. He was a media sinkhole. Of course, no one would want him. His parents too, are his fault. Were he not such an asshole, but a proper, lovable kid instead, they never would have picked work over him. Healer hag is being too nice— her vision is clouded by bias.

But then, he wishes he could be happy again too. He's tired of being tired.

"How am I supposed to get better?" he asks after a pause.

"Take a break, pet Satsu, cook, do something fun…"

"That's what I was doing before and I got kidnapped anyway."

"Let's lay low for a while. We'll figure something out. First, you have to come out of your room, freshen up, walk around a little."

"That sounds stupid."

"Small things end up making more of a difference than you realize. We need to try another type of meds too, at least. Since convincing you for therapy seems a stretch."

"They're not going to work."

"… you'll try them properly at least?"

He plays with the corner of the duvet. "Okay."

Silence falls. More exhaustion, emotional exhaustion seeps into Katsuki's bones. She's right. Insisting he can't change is his subtle excuse for his lack of change. He's taking the easy way out. He's not trying hard enough.

"I'm sorry," he says. "You've done so much for me and I'm throwing it all back in your face by putting in zero effort."

"You've never put in zero effort," she denies. "I don't think you realize how much you improved your physical state compared to when I found you. You work hard with the shop to the point that I've become dependent on you. You're good with patients, you do all your chores. It doesn't matter to me that you can be brash or rude sometimes. That's part of you too."

“I don’t know…”

“For me, boy, there’s a big difference between having a little attitude and being a psychopath. Some people are harsher by nature. That’s a personality trait like any other. What’s important is that you’re no longer intentionally cruel. I don’t think I’m wrong in assuming you’d never treat anyone like you treated your childhood friend again.”

“No shit,” he says immediately, stomach flipping at the very thought of it, “I feel sick half the time after hurting anyone.”

“I doubt you used to feel this way. You’ve changed.”

“Thanks to getting tortured?” He doesn’t let her speak. “See, I’m confused. Everyone seems to like me more now, so if I’ve changed for the better that means getting tortured was beneficial—”

“*No*—”

“It was though wasn’t it? Like those stories where the piece of shit is put through a bunch of crap and humbled.” A sudden thought comes to him. Maybe UA left him loitering about alone on purpose, maybe they leaked shit to the media themselves as some ploy to let the League teach him a lesson. He’s not sure which is worse, him being so bad they truly didn’t care and succumbed to negligence, or him being so bad they turned a blind eye and waited until someone would come knock him down a peg.

Nah, they wouldn’t do that shit. They’re not like me.

Then again, I wouldn’t do that shit either.

“Again here? We talked about this— equal retribution. Some of the things the villains told you were perhaps truths you needed to hear, but you starving and bleeding buckets helped you in no way.”

“I’d be more susceptible to listening and learning if I was in pain? Like parents spank kids when they make mistakes?”

She breathes in, coughs, clicks her jaw in the way she does when she has a headache. “Do you hear yourself? You can’t be arguing the validity of torture as a teaching method.”

He used to think tying up kids who misbehaved and having their peers pelt them with stones was an acceptable punishment. He got muzzled by the number one hero on national television. He’s not quite sure

where the limits of putting people in their place stand.

“I don’t know what I’m arguing,” he says, frustrated.

“There’s no black and white. There’s no clear-cut good and bad. The villains —and I say this very loosely— humbled you in one direction and traumatized you in fifty others. Sure, let’s say they were right about you not being the most pleasant person at the time, but brainwashing you into thinking you’re inherently evil and can’t change is bullshit.”

He’s never heard her swear this much.

“That’s what I’m trying to get you to realize.”

“I guess.” Katsuki’s throat is parched. Somehow, he feels a little better, wants to disappear a little less than before.

A soft thud rings in the hall, followed by a high-pitched yelp and a purr. Satsu pushes the sliding door open in a way no cat should be capable of, saunters inside like some haughty feudal lord from old stories, looks back and forth at both of them, and beelines to Katsuki’s lap. He licks Katsuki’s hand and his little face twists into an expression of vague disgust, as if trying to tell Katsuki, *go shower, you bum.*

He’s gotten so big, he’s the size of a chunky pillow when stretched out. Katsuki runs his fingers through his storm gray fur, feels his warmth, and feels better right away. He ain’t a magic cat for nothing.

This entire thing happens in the span of a few seconds, and Katsuki is facing his door long enough to catch a glimpse of green striped pajamas and long white hair.

“Eri-chan?” calls Koharu, but they get no reply, and soon after they hear the door of the room to their left snap closed. Looks like the squirt got spooked.

“She’s worried about you, you know,” says healer hag. “She got attached.”

“Her parents left her in a shithole—of course she’d get attached to the first person who dragged her out.”

“She’s blaming herself for all this, for you. Told me I should take her back to ‘Chisaki’.”

He sees red, Overhaul goes from broken and bloodied to haughty and cruel in his mind, from a beat-up chunk of flesh to a sadistic monster of a human. That kid is six, she saved his life for no reason, and he's repaying her with self-blame. "You better have told her that's bullshit."

"I did, and speaking of her," her voice becomes lower. "What are you planning to do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Who's going to take care of her?"

"Can't we—"

"It can't be a makeshift solution. That girl needs stability. I'm getting old."

Foreboding bubbles under his skin, risks overflowing. "What's that supposed to mean?" he'd never accounted for the possibility of healer hag kicking the bucket and he never wants to account for it ever.

"I won't be here forever. Not for long enough to see her grow properly."

"Why are you talking like you only got a few months left?"

"Regardless, I won't be able to keep up physically for long. If she stays, you'll have to help. Be there for her. She's not open with me."

He's not sure what he expected would happen when he kidnapped this six-year-old and stubbornly refused to hand her to what could have been the authorities, but it wasn't this, even though it's the most obvious development in the world.

"I realize it's a tall order for a sixteen-year-old, but you have to commit, or give her up."

"Where would she go?"

"If we hand her over to the police, likely to an orphanage. Though it depends on how wanted she is among villains."

An orphanage does not sound ideal.

"She's old enough to remember everything that's happened, isn't she?"

“Six is well past that age.”

So she’d forever remember Katsuki giving her up— abandoning her. He looks at his hands, might be projecting as he parallels their situations in his mind. It wouldn’t be good for her to be left by someone she’d grown attached to, he knows first hand the feeling of misguided betrayal, the seeds of self-hatred and blame that sows. But on the other hand.

“I’d ruin her.” He doesn’t have the best track record with his own parents, or Deku, or anyone. “And I only got two years to live too.”

“You don’t.” Healer hag scoffs, sends him a dissatisfied look, brow creased. “It’s only a theory. You’re gonna live for a long time.”

“Sure.”

She stares at him. Her brows loosen as she gives up. “You wouldn’t ruin her.”

“Right, forgot about my stellar non-existent parenting resume,” he quips.

“Look. As it stands, I can tell you don’t like the idea of her ending up in some orphanage or shoddy foster home. So you’ve got two options. You keep her here, or you give her up to somewhere she’ll be safe.” He thinks of Deku, for some reason. “Option two comes with its risks, there’s no telling where she’d end up, she could feel abandoned anyway, you yourself might get traced and discovered—”

“—but she also might end up with functioning caretakers who aren’t an old lady and a lunatic.” Koharu wrinkles her nose at his wording but doesn’t otherwise disagree.

“Meanwhile, option one, on the surface more selfish, could only work if you decided to commit. I myself am fully prepared, but I’m also willing to admit I can’t take care of her alone.”

“I’d fuck her up.”

“I already told you you wouldn’t.”

“I would.”

“And so what? There needs to be a decision made, because if you keep ignoring her *that’s* definitely going to ‘fuck her up’. She feels

misplaced guilt and she's not even been here for a week."

"So I messed up already."

"You messed up *because* you're scared of messing up. You're neither a bad kid nor would you be a bad brother." The concept makes him feel weird. "*As long as* you committed. You know first hand I'm sure how bad neglect can be. If you're going to do this, you don't have to be perfect, but you still need to try your best to be."

That's crazy. The entire idea is crazy. "It doesn't matter what I want though, at the end of the day," he says in an effort to give himself more time to mull the topic over. "It should be her choice."

"I suppose so. But there's no point in offering a choice you can't deliver on either."

❖❖❖

That night, after a shower and a bowl of soup, after a long bout of staring at the wall and thinking, after a near full week of nothing but shuteye, Katsuki can't sleep. He's on the walkway outside, wearing a thick scarf and thicker cardigan, socked toes grazing the humid grass of the starlit garden. It doesn't snow so close to the ocean, climate tinted with something tropical and softening, but it still gets cold, especially for Katsuki's sensitive sinuses. There's a string of weak lights dangling on the pole of the clothesline, and there's the glow of the lamp at his back. Apart from the small spots they illuminate, the world is a moon-blue.

He breathes in, takes in the dampness of the air, closes his eyes to pick up the swishing leaves of the evergreen trees of the island.

He does this until he hears a floorboard creak behind him, and is met with a night light lit Eri. It's a scene not unfamiliar, though this time under far nicer circumstances.

"S-sorry," she says shifting back as if preparing to bolt again. Her hair is tied in long pigtails. Her horn seems bigger, her aura bright.

"It's fine, kid," he says, startling her by facing in that direction. "Can't sleep?"

She nods.

"Wanna come over here?"

Rising shoulders, another, shakier nod.

He surveys the room until he finds a discarded scarf, colored blue and orange, ugly as hell. “Grab that and c'mon.”

She rushes to do it, wraps it around herself, more her shoulders than her neck, and skips across Katsuki’s room. A good half meter to his left, she sits down. She mirrors his stance, shivers a little at the temperature change —her legs don’t even come close to grazing the ground. The socks she’s wearing are big enough that the piece of fabric belonging to the heel hangs a few centimeters above her ankle. She stares at the string lights on the clothesline and plays with the hem of her too-long nightshirt sleeves.

“I’m sorry for ignoring ya, brat,” he says after it’s been long enough in the silence.

“N-no. It’s okay. Granny says you were tired.”

That’s a sweet way of putting it.

She's staring at his face hard. The weight of the glasses on his nose-bridge makes him feel stupid. He looks like a nerd, but putting them on had made such a noticeable dent in the quality of his vision he's not taking them off again. The headaches have mostly faded too.

"They help me see," he explains even though she doesn't ask.

“Are you less tired now?”

“Mhm.”

“Right.”

“Yup.”

Well, this is awkward. Katsuki does not have family person instincts. He doesn’t get how this stuff works. There’s no choice but to try though, isn’t there?

“Wanna go for a walk?” he asks, and she turns to look at him curiously. “You ever seen the sea?”

“No. What’s that?”

“Like…a big swimming pool,” he tries to find the words to explain.

“What’s a swimming pool?” *Damnnit.*

“Uh… a bathtub? A very big bathtub. Real fucking big.” He can’t catch his swear words. Oops. “You wanna see it?” he distracts.

“Now?”

“Yup?”

“Granny won’t be mad?”

“Nope.”

“You’re not tired?”

“Nope.”

“Okay,” she says, trying evidently hard to keep her voice level. Katsuki steps up and inside to fish his waterproof shoes and coat from the back of his closet, and that’s where the problem of the kid having zero clothes or shoes in her size becomes apparent. He exchanges the cardigan for the coat and helps her into it, its woolen sleeves needing to be bunched up at the ends, its bottom hem needing to be folded.

“You don’t got shoes, so I’ll carry you,” he tells her, and picks her up even though there’s a ghost of hurt in the leg where he got shot. He finds a lantern in the hallway and tasks her with keeping it on and up, trying his hardest to tone down his instincts begging he give orders harshly. Then, he’s hopped from the platform of the house’s walkway onto the front garden, crunching wet grass. It rained a little earlier.

She leans her head on his shoulder as they’re walking, winding through forested paths and tree-lined canopies. The route to the small beach at the front of the island is narrow, flattened ground unevenly “paved” with dirt and pebbles. It takes fifteen minutes or so to walk through, and the cool air numbs Katsuki’s face a little.

But soon, the trees are opening up and growing rarer as they exit the route, replaced on the horizon by the vast ocean, foggy in the distance, a pretty, serene blue. The continental breeze leaves the sea calm, accented by small, waltzing waves. This part of the beach is mostly sand, the wet, packed version, and the tide has formed tiny, half-meter-long islands and pockets across the coast. He stops near a tree stump, toppled and cut down but growing small leaves through side branches, relatively dry, and berates himself inwardly for forgetting to bring some sort of towel.

He lets Eri down.

“Take off your socks,” he says. The beach is barely used, so there’s no dangerous stuff like glass shards or metal bits to get hurt on. “They’ll just get dirty.”

He hooks the lamp on one of the branches of the log, twists the gear so the light gets brighter and brighter, as bright as it can go. The metal grid of its covering casts even shadows on the sand. He turns around, expecting to find the kid sock-free, but she’s still where he left her, unmoved, mesmerized, staring at the ocean like it’s something out of storybooks.

“Big bathtub,” she mumbles in awe. “That’s all water?”

“Yeah.” You can’t even see a lot of it thanks to the faraway fog. On clear days, it seems so vast it makes Katsuki’s head dizzy, though he prefers to watch from his hiking trail than the beach. He’s only come here once, on his early explorations of the island.

“Who filled it?”

“Uh, 'round fourteen billion years ago, there was this huge explosion called the big bang, where all the matter in the universe was created. Among that matter, there were oxygen and hydrogen, which reacted to make water. There were also large rocks with a percentage of ice in them. That matter eventually regathered into planets, so those planets had a percentage of water in their makeup too, which melted and formed big puddles like this.” The explanation would land him a big fat 30/100 in geography and the subsequent thought that he’s basically a high school dropout is crushed fast.

“I don’t g-get it. What’s hydra-gen?” *Shit.*

“It’s.... always been there,” he rectifies like a loser.

She accepts that explanation at face value, wide eyes still on the water. “Is it cold?”

Katsuki walks over and dips his pinky at its very edge. It’s warmer than expected, warmed by the daylight, and unaffected by the earlier rain. “Ain’t too bad,” he says, “Come see for yourself.”

At record speed, she takes off her socks and flings them somewhere, jumps off the high log with a little effort, and steps on the sand. Her momentum pauses mid-stride as she takes in the texture of the sand

between her toes, grainy and unfamiliar, a little wet and clumped up. She digs her heel back and forth, bends down to take a bit of it into her hand, molds it into a sandy shape on instinct. She drops the shape on the ground and its smashing makes her inexplicably curious. "What's this stuff?" she asks.

"Sand."

"What's that?"

"Rocks that got ground for millions of years."

"A rock turned into that?"

"Yup."

"Woah."

His power at that moment strikes him— his power over her worldview. She's been isolated for so long that she knows near nothing, so she asks about everything. Katsuki could tell her with ease, that the sand is some bullshit like unicorn dust and the ocean was artificially filled with a big water pump by a random dude. And she'd buy it. Because outside of a bunch of Yakuza and parents it's likely she doesn't even remember, he's her window to the world. He's the one attaching words and explanations to what she feels and hears and sees.

He could tell her a pot is called a spoon, make up words that no one else uses for everyday things and bill them as the truth, he could tell her anything, and as long as she'd never heard about it before, she'd eat it up. That's how kids learn what's right and what isn't outside of natural instincts. They watch and copy.

Katsuki gulps down the knot of discomfort tying up his throat, feels the aching dread of heavy responsibility.

"C-can I go in the water?" she asks, her tone reluctant. This horrible, exaggerated fear that she'll drown makes Katsuki tense, so he looks and looks for a spot where the tide has formed a shallow stretch. The kid follows him as he walks, and when they pause, he gives her the go, because he's supposed to do that now.

"Take off your gloves too," he tells her, though she seems unsure. "No point if you can't feel the sand for real."

Katsuki has been to so many beaches as a little kid, be they sandy or rocky, deep or shallow, and he's never seen anyone experience the ocean like this. She splashes her foot back and forth in the five centimeters of water, crouches by the sand, and gets the hem of her nightshirt wet, almost does the same to her scarf. She digs her fingers into the wet sand and watches the way it falls. "It tickles," she says, looking up at him, a soft grin stretched on her face, eyes wide. Is this the first time he's seen her smile? The corners of his own mouth seem to quirk up in reply.

They loiter there a bit longer, play with more sand, collect the one off-shell, watch the waves —the kid particularly likes the foam they make on impact with the shore. As she gets more comfortable she asks more and more questions, *why's the moon up there Kacchan? why does the blue wave turn white Kacchan? why is the water warmer than the sand Kacchan? why does the fog look like that Kacchan?*

The moon has moved across the sky a good deal by the time they go back to the stump. The brat sits down as Katsuki rummages for the socks she flung away earlier, frowning when he finds them riddled with sand. He's trying to clean them off, telling Eri to keep warm herself, when there's a rustle from the bushes of the nearby forest. It's only a small bird, dashing past and making a mess of the sand, but it startles the kid enough that her aura inflates and bursts out, seeping into the fallen log and knocking them both away.

Wood twists and turns and is born anew, stitched back into existence by the kid's quirk, rewound to a time when it was tall and overflowing with leaves. Katsuki can't help but be awed by the display, the leftover aura stuck between branches as the tree settles into its new form creating a pretty image of translucent not-quite snow.

But pretty doesn't amount to much, because the kid has fallen to the ground and her quirk is still on, making blades of dry grass sprout from beneath the sand on her fingers.

Katsuki braces himself and soothes her quirk energy by force, hating every second of the burn in a way he never had before.

"I'm s-sorry," the brat wails, staring at her hands as if they'd committed something unforgivable, tucking them away. Katsuki tries to move from where he's crouching so he can face her better, but she flinches and recoils. "Don't touch me!"

"It's fine—" he tries again

“You’ll go poof like papa.” Shit. Did she rewind her dad out of existence or something?

“I won’t. Your quirk is off.”

“But it’s volali— volatile and— and evil. It could turn on again.”

“Ain’t that evil,” Katsuki says, standing up and leaning on their new tree. “This thing’s nice, isn’t it?”

She snaps her mouth shut. “And look, those flowers you grew are pretty cute too, ain’t they?” On the place she’d dug her fingers into before are small patches of greenery, the kind that dies off through the winter, as colorful and delicate as it gets near the shore.

Katsuki knows he should probably say some philosophical crap now, because looking at the flowers seems to make her sob harder, and he hates the way his chest twists when he has to listen to crying children.

“Chisaki is a motherfucker. He’s got worms for brains. Your quirk isn’t a curse, it’s overpowered as hell. You brought me back to life kid. You think a curse would be capable of that?” Well, Katsuki is cursed in his own way, but that’s irrelevant right now.

“You could help a shit ton of people with that quirk. You’d be a sick medic. Career or life-ending injuries, you could make *those* go poof,” he says. “And that would do a whole lot of good.”

“But—”

“My quirk used to be blowing stuff up. Remember how I had you sit in that room and cover your ears while I was blowing a hole in the wall?”

“Yeah.”

“I could do that, but much worse, always out of my hands. I could use that quirk to cause a lot of damage, but if I tried, I could also use it to take down bad guys, or make exits out of buildings like I did for us, or fly—”

“Fly?”

“Yes, fly,” he says longingly. “But I didn’t always do good things with it. Most of the time I did bad things. Used it to hurt people. That didn’t mean the possibility of doing good with it was out of the

question." That's a simple thing it's taken him too long to realize, not just in relation to his quirk.

"What I mean is— you shouldn't be scared of your quirk. If you practice, you'll learn how to control it and get to do tons of good stuff, like making more of those flowers. You could be an amazing hero."

"Like you?"

Stuttering breaths and a slight sense of vertigo, he leans harder into the tree trunk to support himself, curls his fingers into fists so hard he knows he's left bloody crescents on his palms.

"I'm not a hero," he says, as he's sliding down the trunk into a sitting position, though it sounds kind of broken and pathetic instead of harsh like he'd intended. He breathes in and regains balance, allowing the world to re-align. She says nothing.

"But… uh… yeah. Don't be scared of your quirk. It's badass. And fuck Chisaki."

"Fuck C-chisaki?"

"Definitely."

She wipes her face with the dry end of her scarf and sits next to him, straight on the sand. Katsuki hopes she's not cold. Her horn has shrunk again. Ninety percent chance that's some kind of stockpile holder for her quirk. When she digs her fingers into the sand now, it's measured and reluctant instead of carefree. She drops a fistful of sand once, twice, three times. He should say something. He knows.

"Hey, kid," he says, and she freezes, drops her fourth round of sand, and looks at him with too-big eyes.

"We were talking with healer h— uh, granny, about where you're gonna stay. You got two options. Either we drop you off to the authorities." She seems to dim in fear so he keeps going fast. "I know some people, who'd take care of you well, keep you safe and happy." He'd get her to Deku somehow, then Deku would sort it out from there. It would be a lot to ask and more to handle mentally, but if it ended up helping her he'd be willing.

"—or, you could stay here." *Oh no.* "With me and healer hag." *Oh no no.* "I'm a pretty shitty guy so there's always a risk there." *Oh no no no.* "But we'd be open to taking you in for good." He can tell from her

face that she's already decided, and that dread of responsibility he'd felt before returns triple the size.

"Yes," she says immediately. "I wanna stay here."

"You're sure? I'm kind of a criminal."

"You helped me, and I don't like strangers."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah."

"O-okay." He's an embarrassment. "I'll try my best not to suck. Won't ignore you like I've done this last week again."

She nods, sticks out a pinky.

"Promise?" Ah, they're doing this again.

"Promise."

Satsu is waiting by the open sliding door when they get back, and Katsuki is surprised to see the kid walk up to him and lean into his fur a little, still awkward with her hands despite having her gloves back on.

"I called him a whore but he's a good boy."

Katsuki chokes. "Whore— you know what that word means?"

"It's bad, right? Chisaki's helpers used to call each other that when they got mad."

"What other bad words do you know?"

"Bitch," she says with a completely straight face, and he can't help but burst out laughing.

Chapter End Notes

1) the next chapter is the last one of this second bit of the story. then we got some more in between stuff, then we head for the last "arc". this entire thing has rlly turned into a behemoth. IDK how it happened but i hope you guys don't feel things are too drawn out yet XD. i put 30 chapters as a preliminary prediction thingy but I'm thinking we might end up a few over that mark. i just can't

stop writing this it seems.
2) I'm sure i don't need to remind u all by now that everyone is unreliable and just because a character says smth doesn't mean it's right. i have my own perceptions of these characters and readers will also have their own.
3) it's kind of funny because my perception of canon katsuki has changed quite a bit since i started this fic, mostly from more interaction with other fans, more metas, more chapters, more reading stuff that happened before, etc.
4) speaking of canon Katsuki, manga spoilers but ch 322 was an absolute feast for me. 90% of my metas and headcanons were confirmed, i am very satisfied and excited to see where Katsuki's character is gonna go moving forward. i love him a lot XD
5) 99% of the reason i started writing this fic was in fact so i had excuses to write glasses!bakugou i have a little bit of a glasses kink you see
6) keeping Eri's character consistent is hard ngl but i hope it worked out. she's so cute. first glimpses of katsuki-eri fluff.
7) it does not escape me that this chapter is essentially a talk no jutsu XD
8) i also have a kink for setting atmosphere. i have aesthetic ques i really love, and goddamn if i don't include them. i always used to have trouble with the descriptive parts of my writing, so I always look forward to sneaking them in here so I can practice descriptive writing.
9) 2000+ kudos I AM GONNA LOSE MY MIND
10) katsuki is very soft here. my excuse is that he's just done and too tired to be angry. my actual reason is fluff
11) this chapter was also as emotionally draining as the last one, especially the first part, but that might just be my hormones being fucked.
12) it's kind of unclear whether Eri's quirk works with plants or only humans and animals, but it works with plants for the purposes of this fic.
13) i debated a lot on whether to have the second part of the chapter be from Eri or Katsuki's POV. settled on Katsuki in the end.

Chapter 22: Friend's journey to friend

Chapter Summary

the one in which Kirishima Eijirou is a good boy trademarked

Chapter Notes

nervous about this one

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What if it never comes back again Kirishima-kun?” asks Amajiki-senpai, twitchy as always. This is the fourth time. His nerves are rubbing off on Eijirou.

“It will senpai.”

“Fat-san will kick me out. I’ll be useless.”

“You know that won’t happen.”

“I don’t,” he continues to ramble. “It’s not like I have many other redeeming qualities—”

The door of the office snaps open then, saving Eijirou from his distressed upperclassman. In truth, he’s worried too. He’d never heard of any drug that could block quirks like this before coming to this internship, and even the other, more experienced interns have sworn previous drugs lasted only a day at most. It’s been two for senpai, and there’s no trace of his quirk’s return.

Fatgum falls into his desk chair and gives them a smile.

“Don’ make that long face, Amajiki-kun,” he says, though senpai only looks down.

“But—”

“I talked to some people, family 'n friends, and I know a place that can fix ya.” Amajiki-senpai perks up, and Eijirou sits a little straighter. “This place called the Sun Shop. I thought 'twas just an urban legend, but my cousin went some time ago, 'n they fixed his quirk.”

“What happened to it?” asks Eijirou.

“Was kaput. He’d took some quirk drugs that didn’t mix with his body, so it went loony. He couldn’t get it ta stop activating all day and they fixed it in five minutes.”

“Wow.”

Fatgum reaches into his front pocket for a crumpled slip of paper. “Tha shop moves, apparently, so it took me a bit to track down. But this should be the address. ‘s in Tokyo now. Take the train tomorrow. You’ll be excused from school.”

✚✚✚

It’s a hidden place, outside windows reflective and decorated with yellow banners, the front door this tiny thing shoved it seems, in the only cranny it would fit. When they step inside they feel the change in the air, the faint scent of the sea, a rise in temperature and humidity. Eijirou calls out a *good afternoon* upon entering, and he hears Amajiki-senpai stutter to do the same.

“We’re the ones who made the appointment yesterday— from Fatgum’s agency. I’m Red Riot and this is Suneater!” he explains, eyeing the two figures, clad in black and yellow striped yukata and faces covered by smooth, plain masks. The shorter one also has their hair covered, while the other one has a messy head of explosive hot pink so much brighter than their pastel red eyes.

“Welcome, you’re right on time,” replies the shorter clerk behind the counter. It sounds like a grandma if he’s honest. Like a deeper recovery girl voice. “Could you describe your problem?”

“My senpai here was hit by a quirk erasing bullet. They’re a thing that’s recently popped up. Another person from an agency close to ours was also hit, but their quirk returned overnight. It’s been two days and there’s been nothing. We were hoping you could have a look at it.”

Mystery granny picks up what he’s putting down, asks for details on their situation, and discusses possible solutions. Ejirou takes over for his anxious senpai, but it seems Amajiki isn’t the only one who’s overwhelmed. After mystery granny calls on the second person she refers to as assistant for the third time and receives no reply, she stands from the desk and says: “We’ll be bringing over the medical table,” before disappearing into the back of the shop.

Eijirou is confused, but the set-up made him assume he’d be dealing

with a place and people at least a bit eccentric, so he takes it in stride and distracts his mind from the strange situation by exploring the store.

It's about half the size of their classroom, yet packed with things. The wooden walls are lined with shelves and storage units, they themselves lined with bottles and jars of salves and medicines. Behind the solid-looking wood front counter, engraved with linear and floral designs, is a full wall of drawers, the type Eijrou had often seen in medicine shops growing up. They stretch from the floor to the ceiling, the topmost row so high up he can't imagine it being very functional. They don't have labels, but their handles are round and crystal-like, picking up flecks of sunlight and reflecting them onto the ceiling. The floors too, are wooden, worn, and aged yet well-maintained.

To his left, there's an entrance-sized opening covered with a beaded curtain, the room behind it housing what appears to be various bits of machinery. It smells an indecipherable mix of pleasant, with hints of green tea and honey and lavender, not at all hospital or pharmacy-like.

By far the strangest thing is the wall that houses the door, because it's wooden and made up of shoji screens while the outside wall was concrete, and the light doesn't even seem to align with the placement of the outside windows. It's like a magic trick.

Not wanting to intrude, Eijirou sticks to the shelves by the front of the store instead of getting closer to the drawers he finds most interesting. One by one, he begins to read the labels. *Saiboku-tō, Seirogen, Q-plus, Achyranthis Root, tea tree balm.* Sparkling glass jars, amber-tinted containers, red-capped bottles. There's some stuff in here he's never heard of before, like packs of winter melon seeds and baggies of apricot kernels, alongside more typical medicine, like *sulphadiazine* and *salomethyl* cream for pain relief.

The two store workers *do* return with a rolling medical table, and pink hair seems to be in much better control of themselves.

"If Suneater-san could please sit down," instructs mystery granny, and senpai is eager to comply and not look weird.

"Could you repeat your problem?" Eijirou can feel his eyes widen, his breath hitch the smallest bit. Because pink hair is probably a guy, and his voice is so familiar. Almost like—

"My… um… m—my quirk s—stopped working." The two proceed to

have a back and forth, and the more Eijirou watches pink hair work, the more his suspicions play on the seesaw. One moment, he moves like Bakugou would, makes the same steps and strides and stances, the next the formal language and nervous gestures and hot pink hair are so unlike Bakugou he wants to berate himself for even considering it.

When the assistant moves his hands in the air like some sort of knock-off smoke show magician and Amakiji-senpai claims he actually feels the difference, Eijrou's suspicions fly out the window, replaced by unfiltered disbelief. The assistant runs his fingers like he's picking at an invisible wrapper, the way he pinches and tugs giving the impression there is in fact something solid there. It takes a while, a real long while, and at one point the guy sways like he's about to drop, takes away his hands like he's been burnt, only to repeat the process over and over and over.

The small worker tells them this is the assistant's quirk working its magic, and Bakugou is according to Midoriya, quirkless. More exes marked over his early, perhaps wishful, impression.

Amajiki-senpai sits statue still through all of it, sweat shiny on his forehead, and Eijirou is relieved by the lack of negative reaction. At least, whatever exorcism weirdness is going on right now doesn't seem to be hurting him. If anything, it's the assistant who's shaking from the strain. The old-school-style analog clock perched on one of the high shelves informs Eijirou a good half hour has passed once the procedure is finished.

Then assistant gives Amajiki the go and his quirk actually works. Eijirou is so high from the moment, so happy that his senpai's worries were truly for naught, that he forgets personal space more than usual and gets all close to assistant:

"That's amazing! You fixed it for real! I was worried his quirk would be gone for good." He flinches slightly in Eijirou's hold, looks around like he's trapped, and slips out of his arms by magic.

"I would prefer if you refrained from touching me." Right away, Eijirou lets go, feeling his ears heat up in embarrassment at his boldness.

"Sorry, man… your voice is just kind of familiar," he confesses and swears pink hair stiffens.

"We have never met." The tone is a little tighter, smoother by force, and it kills the spirits Eijirou hadn't even realized he'd raised.

“Yeah, I know.” Eijirou bites his lip. “I guess I really miss this friend.” A somber laugh escapes him, subconsciously trying to ease the tension he’s created by deciding to bare his soul to this apparent stranger. He’s not sure what’s wrong with him, usually he’s more tight-lipped and careful than this. “What’s your name?”

It’s half-amusing to watch the scramble. “Huh?”

“It’s ‘Huh’? Your name?”

“No. It’s um… uh… Assistant!” *There’s no way this is Bakugou. This guy’s ridiculous.*

“Isn’t that you?”

“What?”

“I know you’re the assistant. I was asking your name.”

“That’s my name.”

“What, ‘assistant’?”

“Yeah.”

Eijirou laughs— nothing sad to it this time. “You’re funny.” He scrunches his nose, can’t shake his intuition. “But man, your voice is *so* similar to my friend’s…Though you’re very different…He was more like… ‘DIE!’” He’d never thought he’d get nostalgic from doing a Bakugou impression, but here he is.

“Was?”

The answers and TMI come pouring out of him. “Yeah he… um… he went through some hard stuff. I haven’t seen him in a long time,” he summarizes, feeling like he’s not doing justice to the gravity of the situation at all. “I wish I could’ve done more to help him.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t blame you.” That *is* what he said in the letter, isn't it?

“Maybe… but I was still a pretty bad friend.”

“That’s fucking bullshit,” assistant mutters, and Kirishima’s eyes widen so fast, because *that* was Bakugou. That was him one hundred percent. Is he talking to fucking Bakugou right now—? But before he can say a thing, pink hair is rushing to correct himself. “That is what I imagine

this friend of yours would say based on your description."

"That was—" Eijirou pauses, thinks long and hard. He could say right now, *you're Bakugou*, get pink hair to take off that mask, and come face to face with either his long-lost best friend of three months or a total stranger. He'd say the gamble is worth it for his peace of mind, but the biggest question mark is this assistant himself, who, if he is Bakugou, seems very insistent on not revealing himself. Eijirou had preached to Midoriya about finding out where Bakugou was and telling the teachers, but now that he's faced with perhaps his biggest lead, his biggest opportunity, he hesitates. Because supposedly-Bakugou does not seem unhappy at all, and this place is not the garbage dump he'd envisioned in his worst-case scenario nightmares. It's nice. It's like Bakugou has found himself a job. *He doesn't want to come back,* Midoriya had said, *if the teachers find out they'll force him*, Todoroki had said. What if Eijrou becomes the reason supposedly-Bakugou looses his newfound stability? The reason he's forced back into an environment that rejected him? Midoriya was right. Eijirou's scared of messing up again too. So, he bites his tongue and goes with the flow, takes the coward's approach. "—really accurate… I can't believe you got him down so easily."

"I am… very perceptive." Eijirou can't do anything but laugh at pink hair's awkwardness, pats him on the back again, trying and failing to convince himself this isn't Bakugou he's pretending not to recognize.

"Thanks for cheering me up bro. And for helping senpai. You've done us a huge favor."

"Not really," pink hair says. "You are paying for our services."

"Still, thank you. I was worried about senpai's quirk. I think we've stumbled into something real dangerous." Fatgum told him they'd been dealing with drugs for years, but something this powerful had never ever cropped up before. Had Eijirou not used his hardening in time, he'd have been hit by a bullet too. And the assailants were small fries, at the very bottom of drug trafficking chains. There was no telling what those at the top were planning.

Amajiki-senpai pays, and Eijirou remembers his lingering look, his off hand remark about the sea, as he takes a step he would later regret and walks out of the store.

✚✚✚

"Senpai," he says when they're taking the train home, sitting side by

side in the cramped cart. Amajiki gets motion sickness, so Eijirou let him have the window seat. Although it's cold, the sun outside is unforgiving, and the leather of the seats is stuffy and smelly. This particular train happened to be on the older side. "Could you keep the details of what happened today under wraps?"

The older boy unsticks his cheek from the glass it's smushed against, rubs at his jaw, and levels him a look. "What do you mean?"

"Like… not say specific stuff of how the process worked and what the shop looked like…" he fumbles to explain.

"Why?"

"Uh… I can't tell you the exact reason, but it's better if that place stayed an urban legend. Especially the assistant."

"I shouldn't even tell Fat-san?"

"You can say they helped, but give… confusing details. Say the assistant was a girl, or that her hair was long and black or something."

"Are you telling me to lie?"

Oh shit. That's exactly what he's asking, isn't it? And his explanation is less than satisfactory. If he keeps going like this, he'll start to look suspicious. So he looks at Amajiki, considers his personality once, twice, three times, and takes a leap of faith.

"You know Bakugou Katsuki?" Senpai nods slowly, seems confused by the sudden change of topic. "I'm fifty-two percent sure that assistant was him. And he wasn't looking to get found out."

"But— the news said Bakugou-san died…"

"It's a long story, but we know he's not dead. That clerk today *might* have been him. I know this is a lot to ask, and that as heroes in training we're obligated to provide any and all information we get a hold of surrounding missing person cases, but—" Eijirou shifts backward to give himself room, bends into a bow as deep as his seat will allow, "—please, senpai. Make an exception and lie for me this time. I was Bakugou's friend and I couldn't do a thing when he got kidnapped. If that really was him and he's gone to such great lengths to keep from being recognized, I don't want to be the reason he's busted or targeted."

“Wo-oah, K-kirishima-kun, raise your head,” Senpai says after a beat, flustered and a bit shocked from the sudden revelation. Eijirou keeps firm, firm enough that Amajiki reaches over to shift him up into a straight sitting position himself. “Don’t do that,” he continues, bright red, “Look how many passengers there are! …I get it, alright? I’ll help throw off the trail. I don’t know what’s going on, I’m not honestly that invested, but you are, and he helped me out today. I’ll do it. So no more bowing, okay?”

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Things can’t go right for Eijirou.

He got his ass handed to him against the Hassaikai, managed to beat only two of the villains before being put so out of commission he’s now in a full-body cast. But, even plastered from head to toe, he’d stuck himself in this wheelchair and begged Fatgum to be allowed to sit in at the final debriefing, because a lot had happened after he’d passed out. Namely that *Bakugou* had been there, had blown up an entire portion of the basement, and disappeared with the girl they were supposed to be saving. Eijirou hadn’t even seen the room Chisaki was found in, but just Midoriya inconsolable that noon at the hospital had been enough to fuel the cruelest scenarios in his imagination.

If he’s honest, the Sun Shop assistant had slipped his mind as they were thrust deeper and deeper into the Hassaikai case, and it’s only when Bubble Girl and Nighteye are laying down the facts, talking about Bakugou’s assumed quirk effecting ability, that it all comes rushing back and he’s grateful ten times over that, one, he had Amajiki swear not to tell back then, and two, Amajiki isn’t here right now.

Just when he thinks things can’t possibly get worse, has managed to poorly convince himself that assistant is not Bakugou, Bubble Girl goes and says: “Changes in appearance from a loss of pigmentation might explain why he’s been scarcely recognized, and he used chalk dyes for his hair, according to Kurono.”

“What— what color?” he can’t stop himself from asking, uncaring of the strange looks the question earns him.

“Pink.” Right. Pink. Fucking pink. Of course, it was fucking pink. He’d tear his hair out if his fingers weren’t neigh unusable. What a joke. “It was light when he was found and faded away due to the experiments and time. Why do you ask?”

“I— no reason.” He only half listens to the rest of the debriefing— gathering that Bakugou got fucked over again. Is this his fault? Had he snitched on Bakugou back then, would this have never happened? Was the Sun Shop’s appearance deceiving, and Bakugou was being forced to work against his will? Is Bakugou even still alive?

This guy will give Eijirou grey hair at sixteen, and if he doesn’t figure out what to do from here, his inaction will eat at him forever.

✚✚✚

He corners Amajiki in the bathroom before they leave like a mummy revived to play middle school bully lunch money solicitor and begs him to keep the secret until Amajiki has promised ten times in a row.

✚✚✚

The final two weeks of term are exam days, which Eijirou tries his best not to bomb by studying with Yaoyorozu (who seems more than a little fed up of asking “Are you alright Kirishima-san?” when Eijirou shows up to their tutoring sessions sleepless and trudges through exercises like a walking corpse). The students involved with the Hassaikai raid had the important exams delayed to the start of next term for the sake of fair play, since the mission ended up far beyond the expected difficulty level and was messy for a million reasons for certain students and teachers involved. Aizawa-sensei himself had shown up a short-tempered and somber wreck on the first day back to classes. Still, the term ended eventually, and they were allowed home visits for the first time in months.

Eijirou has never been more grateful for school holidays as he and Ashido ride the train back to their hometown. He’s not the most entertaining company these days, but Ashido chatters his ears off the whole ride like the fantastic friend that she is, and her stories of her parents and siblings manage to rekindle Eijirou’s excitement. He misses his own mom more than he realized. She worked a lot as a single mom, and UA was expensive despite Eijirou’s partial scholarship — they couldn’t afford for her to take days off— so throughout his hospital stay, they’d only managed to face time.

She hugs him at the door, her wide, strong shoulders engulfing him in warmth. He’s tall enough now that he has to lean down a little to lay his head on her shoulder, but her hugs are still as comforting as ever.

“My little boy leaves for months and comes back all beat up,” she says, poking at the plasters dotting his cheeks. “That school of yours is

working you too hard.”

“It’s part of the job, ma.”

“Oh, I know. That doesn’t mean I can’t worry.” She brushes gelled bangs from his face, refrains from mumbling about his "ridiculous hair", *are you trying to imitate a porcupine?* “Are you sure you don’t need me to come and have a few choice words with that principle of yours? I could tear him a new one—”

“I’m sure, ma—” Eijirou says, the corners of his mouth quirking up a little. His mom has always been an unstoppable force, determined and head-strong and the slightest bit too stubborn. She’s fiercely protective of family, sometimes overprotective. For a while, it had driven Eijirou crazy, but now that they're apart, it makes him nostalgic.

She hauls his heavy suitcase inside their little apartment with ease, and once Eijirou washes up, they spend the rest of the day catching up and lazing around the house, nursing twin mugs of hot chocolate. It’s the calmest he’s felt in weeks.

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The next morning Eijirou wakes up to pancakes and the nine am news. The dramatic headline goes “Failure at the Hassaikai?” and though his mom switches to a cooking channel before they can hear the segment proper, the spell of home is broken and Eijirou’s mood is gutted.

“Don’t play with your food, Eiji,” his mom scolds throughout breakfast, frowning more and more at his lack of reaction. “Kid, what’s wrong?” she asks when he leaves his plate by the sink only half-eaten. She’s made pancakes because she knows Eijirou loves them, so seeing him eat so little must be raising red flags.

Eijirou hesitates. Knows he’ll feel better if he talks to someone. So he takes the indirect approach.

“Suppose you had this friend. And suppose you got separated after this friend goes through some hard stuff and goes missing. Everyone is looking for this friend, including you, and you come across who might have been them on a mission. Suppose you choose not to confront them, and keep it a secret from teachers too. Suppose this friend ends up getting hurt and disappearing again. And now you feel like you could have prevented it. What would you do?”

Mom grips his hand and drag him to the couch. He gulps as they sit

down. No backing out now. “Kid, that sounds a little too specific to be hypotheticals.”

“Um…”

“…It’s that Bakugou, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Eijirou deflates. He’s never been capable of subtlety with his mom.

“Something happened to him again?”

“Yeah.”

“That poor boy. This is ridiculous now.”

Eijirou leans back into their couch, softened by wear and tear, and lets out a short, un-humorous laugh. “Tell me about it.” He picks at the couch slip cover, patterned with childish red cars. His ma doesn’t throw stuff away, even if it’s the ugliest thing she bought after Eijirou threw a tantrum over it twelve years ago. He launches into an explanation of the situation, omitting the graphic details. “And I don’t know what to do…”

“Go talk to him,” his mom says, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

“I can’t do that—”

“Why not?”

“Because…” and try as he might to rake his brain he can’t think up a proper argument. *Why* not? He knows where Bakugou at the very least works. There’s nothing stopping him from showing up again and having a talk.

Because I’m scared.

“We learned how important communication is the hard way, didn’t we?” His mom and him hadn’t always had this close a relationship. When Eijirou went through his roughest patch in middle school, his self-esteem was shot, and his days were getting harder and harder, his mom — who’d grown up in a conservative family that never placed much importance on mental health — didn’t really get what was going on. She’d tell him to keep his head up and push forward as if grit alone could solve the problem, and she only realized how bad

things had truly gotten when at the end of second year, Eijirou was diagnosed with depression. The issue was no longer an intangible joke, and she worked hard to learn more about how to help Eijirou with his mental struggles.

That, coupled with Eijirou's own efforts and his effective "rebrand" going into UA, made their bond iron-tight. If anything, his mom had spent a little too much time pouring over psychology books, to the point that she'd gotten scary good at playing therapist.

"You've said you received letters, your other friend a few short texts, but nothing else. If that's all you've talked despite everything that's happened, no wonder there's been miscommunication! You have no idea what Bakugou-kun wants, and you'll never know if you never talk to him."

"But what if he doesn't want to talk to me?"

"Then at least you won't regret never trying."

✚✚✚

His mom is right and Eijirou's mind is made, but now there's another problem. The Sun Shop is a moving shop, and from what he saw on the report, the location Eijirou visited in Tokyo definitely fell within the search area where the police had patrolled and found nothing. It's likely that by now, the shop has long moved from Tokyo, and Eijirou has no idea how he's supposed to find it again.

Fatgum had called it an urban legend, and though it isn't one Eijirou had heard of before, surely the internet would know. So he spends a whole day cooped up in his room, laptop and ma's tablet open, scouring forums and watch-lists. After hours of non-stop scrolling, he comes across a small, community-run blog entitled Sun Watcher, a web-page chronicling the history of the Sun Shop's mythos. This place has been around for decades, and Eijirou's labeling of the small clerk as a grandma may not be off mark.

Apparently, way back in the day the owner would leave flyers with clues for the next destination whenever they moved, but that hasn't happened in a while, so now the new location is largely spread thanks to word of mouth and hearsay. On the surprisingly busy discussion board section of the blog he finds a pinned post on the shop location, marking on the map a nosebleed neighborhood in Sapporo.

That's a literal thousand kilometers away.

Flight prices are ridiculous for last-minute round trip tickets, and temperatures in Sapporo hit a record low for December, but Eijirou feels nervous excitement building in his chest anyway. Because he has a lead, and he got paid a hefty sum for helping to take down two of the Eight Bullets. He'll barely have money leftover for meager savings and a couple of new year gifts once he's bought this inflated ticket, and the numbers on the airline's website are almost too big to stomach for a guy who's always lived frugal, and yet. He rushes downstairs to talk to his mom, she sees how much he wants it, gives him the permission, and they find the cheapest economy class spot available as soon as possible.

The next morning Eijirou is taking the bus to Shizuoka Airport and boarding his two-hour flight.

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Sapporo is snow-covered and icy and so fucking cold, and as Eijirou's hands shake with chills, the printed-out map gets all crinkled. He follows the line highlighted in red to the correct spot, a back area of an abandoned building, and sure the yellow door is there, but there's also a sign on it that says, in big letters, *closed*.

Eijirou opens the forums again and starts to feel very stupid when he scrolls through the comments of the location post (something he'd forgotten to do in his rush) and finds dozens of upvoted comments saying the shop has been closed for a while. Speculation as to why is quickly shut down by most posters—this forum seems to have a dedication to preserving the mystery of the store.

That doesn't matter now that he's here though, does it? So what if it's closed? He'll ring that doorbell anyway. It's not manly to turn tail now.

So ring that doorbell he does, again and again, for minutes on end, shaking thanks to the shit temperature of the air. He gets so bored after the first five minutes, he starts pressing the button in patterns and rhythmic beats. If this goes on much longer his fingers will get frozen in this pointing position and he'll look ridiculous. He already looks ridiculous, a random guy in front of a too-small door pressing at a doorbell like he's the cricket who spent all summer singing and came begging for food to the ants in the winter.

When the door is cracked open eventually, the short clerk peeking through the thin opening, Eijirou goes:

“Hello!” and almost has the door shut in his face. He pushes against it hard, uses his quirk even, and while the little clerk is stronger than expected, they’re not strong enough to overpower an Eijirou high on determination. “Please let me see Bakugou!” he says loudly and bows at the waist (he’s been doing that a lot lately) before the clerk can call the cops on him for breaking and entering. “Please!”

He can’t make out their facial expression through the mask, but the mask itself is more than good enough at looking judgmental. “Remember me, Red Riot? Kirishima Eijirou? Bakugou used to be my classmate, and I know he’s your assistant now, and I need to talk to him.”

“I have no idea who you’re referring to,” says short clerk, indeed the grandma from last time.

“I know you do. I know he’s here too.”

“I don’t know any Bakugous. Young man, you are disrupting the order of my store. You’ve been ringing the doorbell for half an hour without pause, you’ve ignored the sign stuck in front of it that clearly says closed. I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

Eijirou hesitates. Has he messed up? Assumed wrong this whole time?

No. That can’t be it.

“I promise I’m not here to get him discovered by the police, I promise I’m not going to turn him in. I’m not even planning to tell anyone. I just need to talk to him. This once and you’ll never hear from me again. I swear. I flew all the way here from Shizuoka and I know Bakugou is in there. I’m not going to back down now.”

They stare at each other for an uncomfortable amount of time, until short clerk steps to the side and motions for him to come in. Eijirou’s nerves melt away, and so does the chill in his fingers. He hears a pitter-patter coming from somewhere, and if the air outside was cold but crisp, in here, it’s humid and warm enough to redden his cheeks. The store doesn’t appear to have been in use for a while, and Eijirou follows as he’s lead into the back and instructed to leave his shoes by the genkan and wash his hands in the bathroom.

Said bathroom has a little window, and beyond it, he can see a whole forest, one that very much would not have fit within the abandoned building in snowy Sapporo. He can see rain. They’re somewhere else now, somehow.

Short granny clerk watches him like a hawk as he cleans off, and Eijirou's nerves worm their way back to the surface when he wipes his hands and follows again to, he assumes, where Bakugou is at. He's not trying to be nosy, but the worn and warm house definitely seems homely. They step in front of a sliding door, short clerk pulls it open, and before Eijirou can get a single look in, something furry has jumped on his face and forced him to topple backward.

"What the—" he struggles to pull the cat off himself, getting a faceful of hairs. The thing is feral like Eijirou stole its kittens, paws and claws at him relentlessly. And it's fucking huge. A straight-up grey mini-lion.

"Satsu, down boy," calls granny clerk, but the cat looks up at her, squints, and goes right back to scratching Eijirou's favorite red puffer jacket. Eijirou, exhausted and confused and very much winded, lets his head rest on the heated hardwood and almost submits himself and his poor jacket to death by cat. That is until a very familiar voice makes him want to die for different reasons.

"Come back here you cat fucker," and, like magic, the cat raises its head, interest in Eiirou extinguished, and saunters back into the room it burst from. Eijirou props himself up on his elbows. "Your brain cells are real lacking ain't they—" says *fucking* Bakugou (!!!) as he strokes the cat. Eijirou's dumb eyes start to water. Then they meet Bakugou's his easygoing demeanor takes a vacation.

But Eijirou doesn't care. He doesn't have the fucks to give. Not when Bakugou (with glasses and freckles and scars stretched over his fingers and *so* pale) is right there. *Alive.*

"Hey," says Eijirou dumbly, crying through a grimace, and Bakugou spares him one frozen glance before gluing his eyes to short granny clerk with this look that says *you've betrayed me.*

"He knew you were here himself," she justifies.

"And I seem to remember you were the one who told me I wouldn't be recognized."

"Well…"

She hooks her cane in Eijirou's scarf, drags him into what's apparently Bakugou's room, and closes the door on them. "Talking will be good," she yells from behind the screen, then proceeds to disappear. Bakugou lives with freaks.

For ten seconds, no one says a thing. Bakugou hands him a handkerchief for the tears.

“Hey,” says Eijirou again once he’s wiped his nose, and the cat chucks a toy ball at him. “This thing hates me doesn’t it.”

“*He’s* protective,” replies Bakugou, a little hesitant. Eijirou sits up and takes a look around the room. It’s a bit smaller than their dorms at UA, tatami floor, the walls bare. There’s a futon with a pinstripe cover folded up in the corner, a wardrobe or storage unit embedded into the wall, and a lot, a lot of books. Books on the floor, books on the low rise desk, books on the windowsill, books in the bookcase. Paperback and hardback and leatherbound journals, big papers scattered on the floor, pens and pencils in nooks and crannies. Thanks to the rainy weather wherever they are the light levels are low, so Bakugou has switched on his table lamp, and looks to have been in the middle of something when Eijirou and short granny clerk interrupted it. *How to stop losing your sh*t with kids,* is entitled the book at Eijirou’s feet, and he’d never pegged Bakugou as the type to read parenting self-help.

“So…” starts Eijirou for the third time, because Bakugou looks like the only thing keeping him in this dimension is the cat he’s petting, and Eijirou is the one who got them in this mess in the first place.

“Are you here to take me back to UA, Kirishima?” Hearing his name makes him shiver because *shit*, Bakugou is really alive and physically fine. “Because I ain’t coming—”

“No. No. I’m not.”

“What then?”

He takes a deep breath in. “I’m here because I was worried. I wanted to make sure you were okay. And I wanted to say sorry—”

“Huh?”

“For not doing much for you and—”

“O-okay stop right there. This is Deku all over again. Are you thick?” says Bakugou, indignant. “Because I swear I’ve told you five million times now you did nothing wrong and you still won’t listen.”

“It was only twice!”

“Three times, and it’s enough ain’t it? C’mon.”

“Forget it…” Eijirou is making this about himself isn’t he? Because in all honesty, there wasn’t much he could have done, not this time at least. “So… are you okay?”

“As okay as it gets I guess.”

“That’s great!”

Silence.

“What are you here for, really?” asks Bakugou, and Eijirou isn’t sure that he knows the answer. Some part of him hadn’t even expected to find him in here at all, much less get to talk.

“To see you?” Bakugou raises his eyebrows, scrunches them like he has a headache, and takes the conversation into his own hands.

“Was it that obvious?”

“What, that Assistant was you?”

A nod.

“I mean, what kind of name is assistant, man? You expect me not to get suspicious? And then who says 'I am… very perceptive.' anymore?” Bakugou’s ears go a little pink. “But the pink hair and formal speech threw me off at the time. Wasn’t until people at the Hassaikai raid debriefing talked about you and your quirk magic thing that the pieces clicked.”

Mentioning the Eight Precepts makes Bakugou visibly uncomfortable. “Hassaikai raid? You were there?”

“I’m interning under Fatgum, and his agency was one of the ones involved with the raid. Was happening on the same day you escaped. I didn’t get close to the bottom floors though, got held up by a few of Chisaki’s men upstairs.”

“Was it just you?”

“Nah, we had a huge operation. Ryuukyuu on the surface, Nighteye, us, lots of freelancers, and policemen. Midoriya, Asui, Uraraka, even Sensei was there.”

“Damn. And I didn’t cross a single one of you,” Eijirou isn’t sure if Bakugou’s saddened or relieved by that.

“You were busy blowing the bottom floors to bits,” his tone is light but Bakugou winces regardless, and Eijirou may have poked a wasp’s nest.

“Did I uh… off anyone?” he asks after a visible swallow. Eijirou could lie and sugarcoat it, but Bakugou might hate him forever if he does.

“Nemoto died, Chisaki is catatonic and the woman you shot is paralyzed.” Bakugou inhales, sharp, a little wet, and says, “Right.”

“It—”

“You have a provisional license, right?” Eijirou nods. “So you could arrest me.” That was not what he was expecting. “*Should* arrest me.”

“I’m not gonna do that.”

“It’s the law though. I’m a murderer.”

“Yeah, but….” he wants to say, you had exonerating circumstances and it was self-defense, but then he thinks about the commissioner at the debriefing and Rock Lock’s lab rat comment, and wonders if promising that Bakugou would win the inevitable trial in a way that was favorable to him would be wishful platitudes. Bakugou doesn’t seem like he’ll kill a million people by suicide bombing with his own body as the bomb anytime soon like the commissioner was suggesting, he has a room and a cat and everything. Still… “You should turn yourself in and see that you’ll be declared innocent.”

Bakugou sighs in fatigue —as if he’s been having conversations like this non-stop and has long grown tired of them. “I bet you think I should come back to UA.”

“I—” Though this place is beyond expectations...“—do.”

“I can’t do that.”

“If you’re worried about them not supporting you, Sensei regre—”

“It’s not solely that I don’t want to,” he cuts off. “I *can’t*. I passed out twice that day I came to see Deku. Even now I get all dizzy and disconnected when someone *mentions* UA. That place makes me sick.”

Eijirou swallows. “Oh.”

“Yeah. And you can bet that now that they know I can do bullshit to quirks, they’re gonna eventually start using me as a test dummy.

They'll be nicer about it than the League and Caw Caw bitch, but they'll do it anyway. It's a useful ability. It would be a waste not to take advantage of it. I know that. But I don't want to be a test dummy."

Again he wants to promise Bakugou that won't happen, but Eijirou can't. He has no power to guarantee it.

"I can't be a hero anymore and I've accepted that. I don't want anything to do with hero shit." Hearing that makes Eijirou sad, considering how stupid motivated Bakugou had been mere months prior, how that stupid motivation inspired their bond in the first place.

"Wasn't number one hero your dream?"

"It was. Isn't anymore." Bakugou shrugs, pets the cat in a different direction. "I hadn't accepted it before, but now I have. I'll find something else."

"You shouldn't have to though."

"It is what it is. Something can't be my dream if it makes me sick to think about. I gotta move on."

Eijirou can't argue with that, not when Bakugou seems so accepting. It would be cruel to force someone back into an environment they were violently rejected from when they don't want it, then pretend to have done them a favor. He came here to learn what Bakugou wants, and Bakugou is telling him, so Eijirou will listen.

"It's my own fault that I didn't detach myself enough the first time—sending those letters and reports, being all hung up on it. Wasn't healthy for me. This time it's for good." Bakugou seems sad too. "I'm tired, Kirishima. I want a regular life."

"But you're not safe."

"Wasn't before either. It'll be fine. I'm one guy. I'll lay low and people will forget about me. I like it here. Got a job and everything."

Again, Eijirou can't argue. The selfish part of him wants Bakugou close by, the rational part of him is screaming that Bakugou needs time to heal, and that's not gonna happen in a place or around people that attend a place that triggers him. It would be rubbing it in his face, that they're heroes and he'll never get to be. This on top of issues from all the… other stuff he's been through.

“I know it’s a bitch move, killing a guy then playing pussy, but I can’t deal with trial dates and media and all that crap, even if I am innocent. I think I’d shut down. I’ve always been a shitty guy. I might come back at some point and face it, but I learned my own limits the hard way, and I know I can’t right now.”

“Okay,” he says. “I won’t tell.” Call *him* shitty, but he never gave a crap about justice for Nemoto anyway.

“Thanks.”

They catch up a bit more from there. Eijirou asks Bakugou how he got here, what he does, why he named his cat murder, why he dyed his hair pink of all colors…. It’s like old times. They make fun of Eijirou’s picture in his provisional license, Bakugou asks how he has the nerves to gel his hair every morning when seeing it down for the first time today makes him realize Eijirou’s spikes aren’t natural like his. One, two hours slip by, short granny clerk Bakugou calls healer hag brings them two cups of tea. The rain outside continues to fall, the clouded sky grows darker and darker.

“What did you do to Eri, by the way?” Eijirou asks between sips of his drink.

“Don’t make it sound like I ate her or some shit.” Bakugou scowls. “She’s two doors down, napping’s my guess. Her sleep schedule’s kinda fucked— What, why are you making that face? You think it’d leave her in the streets?”

“Nah, man. It’s nothing,” he says but can’t wipe the loopy half-grin from his face. “You’re so much nicer.” It’s a pure compliment on Eijirou’s end, but even as Bakugou flushes and mumbles a dismissive *sure*, Eijirou gets the sense the comment spawns mixed feelings.

“Well, she chose to stay here, so I ain’t about to let her down.”

“Hence, the parenting books?”

“Shut up.”

His flight home is at four pm, so he starts his goodbyes by three.

“Kirishima, you know how I said I wanted to move on?” says Bakugou a short while before Eijirou has planned to leave. “You gotta do that too. Move on, I mean.”

Eijirou frowns, tries to gather his thoughts. “You, Deku, Sensei, anyone hung up on it on that side. What happened happened. No need to beat yourselves up over it. Focus on your own shit.”

“That’s hard to do bro.” He thinks about Midoriya’s breakdowns, Sensei’s increased strictness towards risky plans. “People care about you. You can’t stop them from worrying.”

“Try to worry a little less then. Focus on being a kickass hero or whatever. I don’t wanna be a burden.”

“Don’t sweat it,” he says simply, pats Bakugou on the back, and almost flinches at his flinch. “I’m gonna head out now. Gotta catch my flight.” He stands up and smooths down his jacket.

“You’re complicit in hiding a criminal. I got thirty possible charges on my list,” Bakugou says in the entrance hall. The tone is joking but Eijirou gets the feeling this is tearing up Bakugou a lot.

“Circumstantial,” he replies as he steps into his boots and leans to lace them up. He looks at Bakugou one last time before he leaves, sees the ray-like scars spreading from the corners of his eyes to his upper cheeks. He doesn’t know if asking for a hug would be pushing it, so he sticks with *take care* and *goodbye*.

Watching the little door close and having to walk away feels a much more permanent farewell than he meant for it to be.

Chapter End Notes

1) i hope it was good. many of you were excited for the kiri aftermath so here it is ^^
2) kiri's mom is inspired by my own lmaoo. I'm sticking all my family members in here
3) warning right now that this marks part two of this story completed, and just like after chapter 12, next week I'm gonna be taking a break, which means no update. gotta recharge my creative juices
4) thank you as always for your incredible support. comments, kudos, bookmarks, etc, they all put a huge smile on my face
5) i just had an ac installed at my house and ironically idk what temperature to grade it to yet so i end up getting cold.
6) i only got like two, three weeks left of my break. class gonna kick my ass again
7) this chapter is kinda unrealistic maybe? i had fun with it though

8) i hope it's clear that a couple of days have passed since the happenings of last chapter, Bakugou has reached his conclusions, and his thoughts in this one are the extension of that contemplation. it's healing time for him!
9) in case any of you are wondering, no I will not be covering the entire one and a half year following this before we get to the scene in the summary. We're only gonna see snippets, and there will be a time skip. This is very much the muddy in-between of the story.
10) my brain. is mush!!
11) 22 chapters and 160k words that's crazy. ive been at it for damn near half a year. those first few chapters i was like "ill keep each in the 4-6k range now the 7k+ write themselves. it's been a huge help that ive been on break
12) i have discovered a new obsession in symbol page breaks i keep changing them up. hope it's not annoying ^^'
13) heaven knows what's going on with Fatgum's accent
14) regarding mentioned medicines/herbs, Saiboku-tō, Seirogen, Achyranthis Root, winter melon seeds, apricot kernels, are taken from the wikipedia lists of kampo medicine and kampo herbs
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_kampo_herbs
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kampo_list
articles on kampo medicine also used as a reference https://www.frontiersin.org/subjects/kampo-medicine
sulphadiazine is an antibiotic, while salomethyl cream is a pain relief product.
no rhyme or reason for this particular choice of things, they're just there for world building
15) how to stop losing your shit with your kids is a real book
https://www.amazon.com/dp/1523505427?ots=1&slotNum=5&imprToken=aebda235-21b5-d883-c2e&linkCode=ogi&tag=goodhousekeeping_auto-append-20&ascsubtag=[artid|10055.g.25333096[src|[ch|[lt|sale

Chapter 23: Third time's the charm

Chapter Summary

Clothes shopping

Chapter Notes

i'm back with no idea wtf I'm doing.
check out this fucking gorgeous fanart i am obsessed with it
spoilers for ch17

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What’s wrong, Kacchan?” Eri asks when she finds him that morning, staring intently at what could seldom be called a pile of books. Two of them. Brand new, hardcovers shiny, pages straight, spines unbroken. He went out and bought them, *again.* Now…

“They’re cursed,” he says, not lifting his glare.

“Eh?”

“The books— they’re cursed.”

“Why?”

“Bad things happen to me whenever I try to deliver them.”

“How?”

He opens his mouth to reply and closes it again. How indeed. There’s no way books can be cursed. It’s not their fault they happened to be there when things went to shit. It’s an unfortunate case of serendipity. Blaming it on the books is fucking stupid. “Never mind,” he says, and Eri observes him with scrunched brows. Katsuki reaches out, picks up the two volumes, dusts nothing off their covers, and stands up.

“Where are you going?”

“To deliver these.” Enough with the pussyfooting. These two fuckers may not be cursed, but they sure are a pain in the ass — a debt left unpaid. He promised he’d buy new ones and they’re back in Tokyo too. There’s no better time to do it.

“Where?”

“Library.”

She tugs at the leg of his pajamas. “…I wanna come too.” That’s a disaster in the making. But she’s looking at him with these very big eyes and hasn’t stepped off the island once since they came home three weeks ago. Neither of them went into the city in Sapporo. Figures she feels cooped up.

“You ain’t got clothes though.”

Eri looks down at the nightgown that’s so long it wipes the floor for miles; holds out her arms and the rolled-up sleeves unfurl and hang all floppy. “I have this.”

Katsuki scoffs. “You’d freeze your ass off in that.”

“Oh,” she says. “So where do I find clothes?”

That’s a good question actually. She can’t be wearing hodge-podge forever. She needs shit that fits her, and well. They’ve been making do with hand-me-downs and a few things Koharu picked up from the pediatric ward of the hospital way back, but she needs her own things, especially for winter. The task has been nagging at the back of Katsuki’s mind for a while now, but he’s been too busy trying to return to a state of functioning human to give it primary importance.

“Tell you what, you can come with me to the library, then we’ll also stop by the shops to buy you clothes. That sound good?”

“Yes!” she says brightly.

“Shopping’s gonna be tiring though. And draining. We’re gonna see lots of people.”

“What kind?”

“Randoms, strangers, crowds…You sure you can handle it?”

“Yes.” Katsuki can tell she didn’t even think before agreeing. Typical.

“*You’re double sure* you won’t regret it?” She nods.

Decision made, they look for Koharu to get permission and scalp some kind of jacket from her stash. She’s in the shop’s front room, cross-legged on a pillow placed under a large sheet of protective plastic covering the floor. The yellow door has been detached from the wall. Now it’s face down and picked apart, split into two rectangular

frames. Next to this setup is a jar of rust-colored liquid with a fuck ton of golden aura, in which Koharu seems to be dipping a paintbrush on and off. Katsuki can tell Eri is itching to ask what healer hag is doing, but she's too shy to fire off the rapid questions with anyone but Katsuki.

"Sure," healer hag tells them once Katsuki has explained the idea. "But for the sake of my sanity, I'm going to have Aoi drive you."

This Aoi is apparently Healer Hag's niece. Katsuki caught glimpses of her once or twice in the hospital. Seemed overly friendly, kind of air-headed. Katsuki's not the happiest at having to hang with near-strangers, and he can tell Eri isn't either, but the irrational part of him is still screaming cursed books, so the less he'll need to walk Tokyo exposed today the better. Koharu pauses her work to use the phone and lets them know they've got an hour and a half to get ready five minutes later.

He braves the second floor to find outfits. The shop's lower floor is more than enough to serve them, and it was more than enough to serve Koharu too when she was living on her own, so the smallish room on the second floor, effectively the attic, has been collecting dust for a couple of decades. There's a lot of shit up there, most of it useless and in severe need of a wash, but Katsuki manages to unearth a bunch of clothes for Eri: a half scarf, an old puffer vest of Koharu's that fits more like a puffer dress but doesn't graze the floor, a small pair of boots that are a little too big. He strings together an ensemble somehow and hand-washes anything that needs it.

"What are you doing?" asks Eri when she spots him wringing out the shirt he's planning to give her. Doing this will make the dryer work faster. It's necessary when they're on a deadline.

"Squeezing the water out," Katsuki explains and waits for her to get up on the stool so she has a proper view of the sink before twisting the cloth. She eyes the scarf still in the water like she wants to try but doesn't say anything. Katsuki throws the two garments in the rarely used dryer along with a fluffy towel and runs the quarter-hour cycle.

He should get an award for how fast he gets them ready, considering he sprays their hair black too. Not that the chalk dye helped out much the first time, but it soothes Katsuki's paranoia at least a little.

"You'll need to use the pocket exits," says Koharu when they're supposed to leave and Katsuki asks what they're meant to do with no

door. “I’m fixing up everything. It’s overdue for a refresh.”

“Don’t strain yourself.”

“I should be saying that to you. I’m agreeing to this but I swear boy, if you disappear for five days and show up dead again I’ll kill you myself.”

“You know that shit doesn’t happen because I want it to.”

“Of course I do.” She looks up at him. “Just stay safe, alright?”

“We’ll try.”

Aoi is pleasant enough when Koharu is there as a buffer, but when it’s just them in the car, the atmosphere is unbearably stuffy. Her car is nice, a stark difference from flower head’s filthy wreck. It’s a smaller model; the paint is chipped in some places and the cover of the shotgun seat has been mended with two patches. Katsuki could have sat in the front, but he didn’t want to leave Eri alone, so they both stayed in the passenger seats. It smells of vanilla air freshener, the most generic kind. Katsuki runs his nails through the grooves of the middle seat. Eri has her face pressed to the rolled-up window.

There’s not much to see. They’re stuck in traffic. Blue niece's aura is a watery gold. She seems awfully young. Katsuki wonders how she coughed up the money to afford a car in Tokyo of all places.

“You kids heading anywhere else besides the library?” she asks when they’ve spent five consecutive minutes not moving. The tone is sweet, too sweet. Katsuki can tell she’s using the voice reserved for speaking to children, the one he’s always found subtly condescending.

“Shopping for her,” Katsuki replies with his own condescending kiddy voice. It’s disgusting to do, but the way her hands tighten a little around the steering wheel makes it worth it.

“Oh, that’s great! Got any places in mind?”

“No…”

“Aeon Family Mall’s a good spot. A little far out in Chiba, but they’ve got everything. Nishimatsuya and Fukudera Thrift too. Print yourself a map when you get to the library. Fukudera Thrift is my pick, to be honest. Their stuff’s good looking, barely used, and cheap.”

That's… really useful actually. Nice to know what's affordable, since Katsuki's using his own money for this, and he hadn't managed to work all that much before he got kidnapped the second time. "Thanks," he says. Maybe he was too quick to judge her.

The car jerks forward as they get moving again. They've only managed to cross the stoplight before they hit another congestion.

"So… how did you meet auntie?" blue niece asks, clearly attempting to fill the time. Katsuki is reluctant to share personal information, but she's just trying to make plain conversation and she's helped him a shit ton. No need to be a bitch and give her the silent treatment.

"Saved her in an alley from some stupid thug way back." These months have felt like years. "She ended up giving me her card, I called her after I got… yeah."

"I see," says blue, something in her voice Katsuki can't identify, "You're lucky y'know, it's hard to keep that woman's attention. Figures it would take someone capable of breaking the rules of quirks for her to take on an apprentice."

"You know about that— my quirk shit I mean?"

"There are rumors. The sun shop's famous y'know." First Kirishima figuring out the location with ease, now this. Great. He needs to do something about this other than hoping to god no one will ever connect the dots. "Anyhow, try not to make too much trouble for her." His mouth dries up. "Stress is no bueno at that age. She already works so hard. She doesn't need…" the thought trails off, but Katsuki imagines it ending something like *you.*

"Bakugou Katsuki… the heroes got rid of you, right?" It's not an accusation, nor a negative statement, only an observation tinted with curiosity, but still, he flinches. Eri has one ear pressed against the window and the other plugged with a finger, completely absent from the conversation. Someone in front of them honks their car horn so hard they can hear it through the sound-resistant glass and over the sugary pop song filtering through the radio. "Bad PR and all… Auntie works hard, as I said. Keep in mind what she's risked by taking you in. Isn't a chance many people in your position ever get."

"Right," he agrees, palms sweating although she's said nothing false or even threatening. Katsuki peers through the windows at the many screens and billboards of the crossing to distract himself. *Go! Go! Miruko!* reads a big one advertising a new Rabbit Hero action toy line,

S/S Fashion Week Naboo — Small Label Showcase says another.

Once they get through Shibuya the traffic loosens. No one says much else for the rest of the ride. Blue's comments stay the same but Katsuki's replies are clipped in self-consciousness. Eri doesn't talk at all. Once they're parked close to the library, Katsuki asks about the store she recommended again.

"Fukudera Thrift. The one in Naboo street, Harajuku," she says as Katsuki is helping Eri off the car. "You think you'll take long? Should I stay here or head for a coffee or—"

"It's okay. You don't gotta wait. We'll get by on our own."

"You'll ride the train?" Her healer hag reminiscent golden eyes crinkle slightly at the corners.

"The traffic is shit, and I have no idea how long we're gonna take either. No use making you wait around all day."

"Okay then. " She adjusts her seat belt. "I'll see you some other time, Katsuki-kun, Eri-chan."

Katsuki closes the door.

"I don't like her," Eri says once the car has rolled away and they've entered the library compound. Katsuki is too busy melting in relief at finally being back here with the books in one piece to pay attention. He exhales as they pass through the front desk with no problems and makes a beeline for section Q. Eri holds his hand extra tightly, as good as magnetized to his left leg. She's stuck between gazing in awe at the endless shelf-lined walls and halls of the library and flinching whenever anyone walks by.

They're here though, and memory machine is at her desk like she always is; has her nose in a book like she always does. Third time's the charm motherfucker. Katsuki drops the bag of books onto the counter. Eri meanwhile, is short enough that she can stand in front of the desk and not be seen unless you lean down.

Memory machine jerks at the noise and, when their eyes lock, hers take a few seconds to widen in recognition.

"You!" she says dramatically, dropping what she was holding.

"I brought back those books I promised. A little off schedule but—"

She stands up, reaches for the tail end of his scarf to tug at it and force him forward. “Books? Who cares about the books?! Your grandma came over and said you’d never gotten home. I didn’t even know you had a grandma! And look at you! Black hair, glasses, eye tattoos… did you take a sabbatical to become emo or something—”

“Uh…”

“Seriously! I’ve been worried sick.”

“It’s a long story?”

“That’s what you always say! And it’s not a good enough explanation.”

In the shuffle Eri is stuck by Katsuki’s legs, frozen by the barrage of interrogation. Katsuki moves to the side to give her more space, and this makes memory machine realize there’s something she’s missing. She lets go of his scarf and leans over the counter to see. Eri stares up at that moment, and they both gape.

“Bakugou-kun,” Noriko whispers harshly when the initial shock has broken. “Since when did you have a daughter? Aren’t you like sixteen —?!”

“It’s Katsuki, not Bakugou. And she’s not my daughter!” Katsuki whispers back, fully aware he’s flushed from head to toe. “I kidnapped her.” That does not sound much better does it?

“You *kidnapped* her?!”

“It’s not as bad as it seems—”

She ignores him, leans down to address Eri instead, who hides behind Katsuki’s legs and looks around in alarm. “Hon, is he holding you hostage? Do you need me to beat him up for you? What’s your name —?” The kid recoils further and further with every question until Katsuki is forced to shush Noriko.

“You’re scaring her! I kidnapped her from *villains.*”

“Oooh, you should have said that to start with—wait, villains? *What villains?!*”

“Some Yakuza,” he says off-hand, having a subzero desire for explanations. “Your ghost theory was right by the way. Or well, as right as it gets.”

“For real?”

“For real.”

She sits down, shuffles a few papers, and lifts up the fallen books. “Hold on two seconds. I’m getting permission from boss then we’ll head for a snack. You have to tell me *everything*.”

No one gave her permission, in the end, go figure, so Katsuki and Eri were forced to wait for memory machine’s lunch break. They spent so long in traffic they only arrived about a half-hour before noon though, so it wasn’t too long to be patient for. Between the library and now the cafeteria, both vast places very new to Eri, Katsuki’s ears are gonna fall off from all the questions. At least she’s handling the crowds well, he reasons. She won’t eat any of the cafeteria’s food though, no matter how many times Katsuki tells her it’s safe to.

“Listen, kid,” Noriko says sitting down with their orders of coffee and unpacking her homemade lunch. With her there, Eri clams up. “You gotta explain to me what’s going on. Why does your grandma look nothing like your parents and how come she knows you’re alive while they don’t? Is this some elaborate 4d chess thing you have going on because I’m very confused?”

“She ain’t my real grandma. I work for her—“

“You’re getting exploited—?!”

“No, no, I’m getting paid. Plus boarding.”

She squints. “Oo-kay I guess. She seemed like she cared so I’ll let it slide.”

“You’re not related to me either you know—“

It falls on deaf ears as Noriko turns to Eri curled up in her chair. “What about you sweetie? Why didn’t you order anything? A soda? A hot chocolate? A cake? They make good cakes here.” Eri doesn’t even look at her. Noriko grimaces. “Not very talkative is she, eh?”

“Maybe she doesn’t want to talk to someone nosier than the paparazzi,” Katsuki says, noting the discomfort in Eri’s stance. “Leave her be.”

“I’m only curious!”

“Yeah, well, she clearly doesn’t like it. So cut it the fuck out.”

The grimace turns into a frown. “She’s kind of familiar, actually… what’s her natural hair color?”

“White.”

Understanding dawns on memory machine’s face. “*You took her from the Hassaikai?*!” she says too loudly. Both he and Eri flinch, while she covers her mouth with a cupped hand. They’re lucky the cafeteria is busy and the music turned up. “Are you the one who wrecked the operation?! *Failure due to unknown circumstances* was all over the news!”

Unknown circumstances, yup, that’s him. But there’s a bigger problem. “Eri’s face is on the news?”

“Oh no, all the pictures they have are shit quality. You can see her hair and they wrote her eyes are red though. You said Yakuza earlier and I made the connection. Memory thing,” she says. “Kid’s wanted by the HPSC, but I doubt anyone else would recognize her.”

That’s still bad. Real bad. Everyone, even the general public, has far too much information on them. *Rumors about me as an assistant… Kirishima said they know about the quirk crap… it’s way too easy to piece together.* He needs to know exactly what kind of information is out there and he needs to discredit all of it.

“About that. I might need a favor,” he says. “I don’t wanna get caught. So it would be good to know—“

“Exactly what information on you is out there?” He nods. “I figured. I’ll gather it up for you if you want.”

“Thanks.” He takes a big gulp of his coffee. “But don’t you think it’s weird?”

“What is?”

“That I’m taking care of her in hiding? I’m a teenager. Not exactly the most qualified to play parent. Any average person would be ringing up the HPSC pronto.”

“It is unexpected, not gonna lie,” she says. “But that granny was real intimidating and reliable-looking, and you’ve been doing pretty well today with Eri-chan, as far as my sister sense is concerned. Plus, I’ve

heard the HPSC are… questionable."

"They are?"

"It's an open secret they use kids with strong quirks for special programs and such. Or well, most people treat it as a crackpot conspiracy, but it's quite well known." First time Katsuki's ever hearing it. "I'm surprised you don't know, considering your hero school stint and all."

"Don't talk about that shit."

"Regardless, I've heard some worrying things. I know you better than I do random commissioners so." She shrugs.

Everyone Katsuki has met since getting expelled has fifty screws loose. It's nice when it works in his favor.

On the train to Harajuku, Eri is quiet. Katsuki manages to land a seat and props her on his lap. She seems to shrink and glue herself to his chest, face buried against his shoulder. "You sure you're good?" he asks to which she responds with a tiny nod. A few people bump against them on and off as the train moves, and this old man is giving Katsuki a real stink eye for not giving up his seat. He hates how packed the train is, hates the oversaturation of auras even more, but the streets also have plenty of people, and walking from Central library to Harajuku takes a good forty minutes Eri does not have the shoes or conditioning for. Better get it over with the quick way. He keeps carrying her as they leave the train. From the station, it's a ten-minute walk to this Fukudera place.

Naboo street is buzzing, crowded with people in fancy outfits, some well pieced together, some borderline outrageous. He doesn't remember his parents ever going to any fashion week in this place, and the reason why presents itself on the billboard at the entrance of the street.

Experimental Fashion Week Naboo — Enjoy high fashion and streetwear without the pretentiousness for the first time in Tokyo. Damn, that's brutally honest, Katsuki thinks. The rest of the infographic posted on the billboard has two paragraphs on trends and self-expression, along with a list of event participants Katsuki doesn't bother to skim. From where they are he can see Fukudera Thrift's sign, placed on the second floor of a large building next to a crossroad. He grunts when someone bumps him from behind and pulls a statuesque Eri closer.

“Sorry,” says the culprit, dressed in one of those western carnival getups, their outfit a gold embellished dress and their face covered by a smooth white mask decorated with dark frills and feathers. There's a thin field of dark purple around them, packed, barely removed from their clothes. They walk past into the messy street, looking completely at home amongst the other extravagant dressers. They’re so unremarkable in fact, Katsuki loses sight of them in all of two seconds. *Whatever.*

He cuts through people with Eri on his toes and soon realizes the congestion is really only at the narrow entrance of the area, and space opens up the further you walk. There are booths lined up along the street’s square-esque area, stands prepared and the building opposite Fukudera Thrift completely covered with Naboo Fashion Week advertisements. It’s likely the venue of the main event. Katsuki doesn’t give a crap. He sees an open look for his destination and makes for it. But Eri has stopped moving.

“What—“

“Looks like Kacchan.” Katsuki follows her line of sight to see *his fucking parents.* The hag, her hair shorter, is talking to some random lady, while the old man is bustling around what seems to be their booth with his familiar nervous energy. Katsuki is frozen. They’re *right there.*

— Shouldn’t have been born at all!

Their clothes are a little less dumb than everyone else’s but the hag is nowhere near as animated as he remembers her. Their booth is all red and gold and beige, muted and low-key and elegant. The text is too small to read from this distance.

“Kacchan?”

“We’re taking a little detour,” he says. Katsuki’s feet move on their own, taking them closer and closer to that area. He’ll need some type of mask; settles for a discarded piece of tulle he finds on the ground and props up under his beanie. He looks idiotic. Perfect for the environment.

He’s close enough to read the neat lettering of the display. Explosion it’s called. *Bakuha*. He feels something twist; walks even closer. Eri almost stumbles in the rush.

To Katsuki, the hag looks older for the first time in perhaps years. Her

makeup is good, but not good enough to fully conceal thin wrinkles she never used to have, shallow, loopy frown lines. She's thinner too. Katsuki would call her shorter, but it's really him who's gotten taller. She's talking to some random lady in a long-ass dress.

"—a while since you've attended one of these."

"Not that long," says the hag. "It helps distract us." *From what? From me? From my bad PR?*

"Oh dear. I couldn't even begin to imagine how hard it must be."

"We have to move on. Yoshino-san…"

The hag turns her head in his direction for a moment, a split second, and Katsuki shrinks, for some reason terrified out of his mind. She doesn't recognize him one bit of course— goes right back to talking to a random dress lady. Katsuki's heartbeat is louder than the crowd. *We have to move on.* That's what he's been saying too, isn't it? So why does it hurt to hear?

He takes a final look at the loosely draped dresses stitched with a dozen patterns and lavish fabric constructions decorating their booth and begins to step back. How hugely grateful a secret part of him is that he can walk away dawns on him only now. It was the same when he passed by his old house back then. A part of him was relieved that he found it belonging to someone else. Because he wouldn't have to confront anyone.

If Katsuki goes back maybe he'll get a hug, more likely a slap and a screaming fest. But he can't. He won't. Because it's easier this way. He doesn't need to unpack that baggage.

"That was my mom," he tells Eri honestly once they've turned away. Her eyes widen as if the concept of Katsuki having a mother is shocking to her. Up till now, she probably thought the sky shat him out. It puts a ghost of a smile on his face despite his jitters.

"My mama left me too," she says, reading the situation way too well for a six-year-old.

"Yeah? She was a total dumbass for that."

They brush by gold embroidered carnival person again by the entrance of Fukudera, and it might be Katsuki's paranoia, but he swears his hairs stand on end.

Inside the store, it smells of floor detergent and air freshener and a dozen, a hundred perfumes, mixing into something stale. It's emptier in here than it was outside, and a generic song is playing over the speaker system. It's big, two stories with an open floor plan and an elevator at the end of the room. The racks of clothes are infinite, colorful, a variety of textiles and textures. Katsuki trashes the bit of tulle at the bin near the entrance, picks up a shopping basket and they power on, head for the kid's section after finding it on the shop map.

There are so many options, Katsuki's head is spinning. Even more racks, metal shelves of shoes, and walls of pegs with hats and gloves and scarves hanging all over; falling everywhere; almost flooding the floors. Shopping-cart wheels squeak on slightly wet floors. Moms chatter as they peruse the isles. Katsuki reaches for what looks like a pink t-shirt but is in fact a pink dress so long it wouldn't fit even on him and certainly doesn't belong in the children's section.

"So," he says, looking down at Eri, who seems utterly overwhelmed. "Clothes."

"Clothes."

He should have made a list.

They swipe through the shelves. Katsuki picks up some stuff that looks decent. Koharu mentioned Eri's pretty small as far as six-year-olds go, so he chooses stuff sized for five-year-olds. A plaid red dress, a soft blue sweater, comfy-looking pants. "You like these, kid?" he asks, holding them out for her to look at. "I don't know." Does that mean no? He can't tell so puts them in their basket and looks for more. Nothing fancy really-- she needs house clothes. They're not gonna be attending any dinner parties anytime soon. "You can pick your own stuff too."

They must look really hopeless because another customer approaches them. It's a woman with dark brown hair tied in a low braid, clothes super plain compared to everyone else, loose lavender aura, and lips pulled into a slight smile.

"You seem a little lost, kiddo," she says, reaching out her hands. "What are you looking for?"

Katsuki is not prepared for sudden social interactions. He looks at her shoes like a loser. They're white boots, gold-heeled, unfit for the otherwise plain outfit. His eyes narrow. *Oh hell no.*

“Just looking for clothes for my sister,” he says, surprisingly smooth. “Since it’s the end of the year. She’s outgrown all her old stuff.”

“How lovely!” Katsuki wants to punch her, oh yes he does. “What kind of clothes does the young lady like?”

Eri squeaks and hides behind him. Katsuki forces his face into the most condescending smile he can muster. “She’s shy. We’ll be fine on our own. Wouldn’t want to take your time too.”

“I have plenty—“

“I assure you, *we’ll be fine on our own.*”

She backs off. Says good luck and disappears behind piles of clothes.

“What a creep,” Katsuki mutters. Eri seems queasy. “You alright, kid?”

“Mhm.”

“Found anything you like?”

She shrugs. Lots of shrugging today, huh. She hasn’t asked a single question yet ever since the train.

They hurry with picking up the rest of the clothes. Get necessities like shoes (Two pairs: boots and sneakers. Katsuki has an internal breakdown over the children’s sneaker section. Because there are sneakers for babies. And they’re tiny. And stupidly adorable. For the most terrifying split-second of his life, he understands that urge people have to dress their brats with the cutest shit possible. He never wants to experience it again.) a warm winter jacket, and bulk packs of underclothes.

Eri is moving by sheer force of will by the time they get enough stuff to head for the changing room and try everything out.

The closed environment of the room, the lack of music and second-hand conversations, the simple design— they seem to put Eri at ease if only a little. She tries on that first plaid dress Katsuki picked out. It fits her well and she seems to be enjoying herself for the first time in the whole outing.

“This one or this one?” It’s between two wool shirts, the same style but in opposite colors.

“You pick,” she says, just like she says for everything else. Katsuki’s

not a fan of that.

“They’re yours though. Which one do *you* like?”

“I can pick?”

“Yup.”

“Red then. Like an apple.”

“Red it is.”

Soon they’ve picked everything they need, and Eri seems calmer, though tired. At the register, they put some stuff back because the total would end up more money than Katsuki has with him. Clothes are damn expensive. The jacket and boots she puts on right away, while the rest are packed in half a dozen bags they’ll sort at home.

Outside the air is so much cooler, and the sky has begun to grey and darken. Likely, it’ll start to rain. The brat is slower than before, downright sluggish, but crowds have thinned, leaving the cobblestone walkable. They’re nearly at the exit of the street when Eri pauses again, her breath hitching.

“What’s wrong?” She’s shaking. Katsuki drops his bags and crouches down to her level. “The fuck happened?”

“I’m sorry,” she mumbles, chopped up by hiccups. “No—“

“No what?” Did he do something wrong? He doesn’t understand. Tears start to drip down her chin and when Katsuki reaches out to wipe them she just hugs him.

“Tell me what’s up, brat. So I can get rid of it or—“

“I’m scared.”

His stomach drops. “Of what?”

“Him.”

“Who’s him? Where is he?”

“Behind— behind you.” Cut it out with the horror movie crap. He whips his head around so fast it nearly pops off, and his eyes land on nothing but an edgy boutique selling black clothes and chain belts and … plague masks. Oh.

“You mean the mask?”

She doesn’t answer, but that’s probably it.

“I can’t do this. I can’t.”

“What?”

“Breathe.” Oh crap. What does Koharu do with him? Count and shit?

“You can,” he says, trying to sound encouraging. “Trust me.” This is not working. “I’m gonna count to four over and over okay? Inhale on two, exhale on four, okay?”

They do that for a while.

“I’m sorry,” she warbles when she’s a bit less breathless.

“S’ only a mask. I don’t give a crap you know—“

“Can’t pick stuff, can’t talk to people, scared of crowd…”

He doesn’t get where this is going but he’s starting to regret taking her out. It’s too soon. They did too much, went to too many places. He didn’t think things through.

“Please don’t send me back Kacchan!”

Every noise of the path hushes for his ears. He feels sucker punched. Send her back *to Chisaki?!*

“I’m never gonna do that. What the hell?! Why the hell would I do that?!”

“But… but… I can’t do things,” she fails to reason.

“You did plenty of things.” The brat sobs harder into his shoulder. Shit. He’s fucking this up. Of course, he’s fucking this up. He pats her back awkwardly, tries to salvage the mess. “You should have told me when it got too much. You gotta tell me shit like that!”

“But—“ The rest is an incomprehensible mumble.

“I didn’t hear any of that, to be honest.”

“I said I could do it when you asked at home. Kacchan would get disappointed.”

He did make her promise twice, didn't he?

"Who gives a crap about my disappointment?! You gotta tell me shit, yeah? I don't care if I make you promise once or twice or a million times. If you change your mind and think you can't handle something, tell me. 'S my fault for agreeing anyway." He shakes his head. "I'm never taking you back to Overhaul either that's for sure."

"No…?"

"Fuck no! I swear that."

She doesn't say anything more, clearly spent and exhausted. It's a pain in the ass, but Katsuki just carries her all the way to the train station instead of having her walk, then keeps carrying her the remaining way to the shop. It starts raining. The one thing they didn't buy was an umbrella. They get rained on. Fucking fantastic.

As a cherry on top, the Sun Shop's door is not where it's supposed to be, still replaced by the pocket entrance. Does it take this long to redo the warp gate? Katsuki doubts it. Plus, blue niece's car is parked in the empty building next door all but screaming there's definitely something wrong.

Katsuki climbs inside with his soggy bags and lets Eri down. The lights in the main shop room are off, but those in the hallway and living room aren't. He finds blue niece on the couch, reading some sort of journal. "Had fun—?"

"Where's healer hag?" he asks. Blue niece doesn't seem to like the nickname.

"—Cuz auntie's at the hospital."

One day. They can't have *one fucking day*.

Chapter End Notes

1) this is part one of the five chapter in-betweener arc where I'm gonna murder a bunch of plotlines. some of this might seem like filler but i promise you, it is not
2) made aoi a little younger for continuity purposes
3) i feel like the pace of this one is super fast??
4) for anyone who was wondering last chappie, yup kiri did tell his mom bakugou is still alive. she's trustworthy
5) the fluff turned into angst super fast i don't even know

6) brief bakugous cameo featuring katsuki's messy thoughts
7) eri angst because why not
8) i keep getting murdered by flies
9)i downloaded scrivener recently and i only have the free trial but it is so sexy. transferred all of slope in there and when i complied it into a novel it added up to like 550+ pages that's still crazy to me.
10) idk
11) weekly thank you for your support 50k+ hits is insane

Chapter 24: No, you can't stay a high school dropout forever

Chapter Summary

Uncertainty and a new beginning.

Chapter Notes

very nervous yes hiii

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bed rest and cough syrup. That's the extent of healer hag's treatment apparently.

The doctor says she fainted due to a combo of blood loss and low blood glucose levels. She didn't have breakfast and bled out a bunch to use her quirk on top of that. Overestimated how much she could stand to lose. Bad mix at her age. Katsuki was ushered out of the room with assurances everything is fine and now he's in the waiting room, breaking his ass on a plastic chair and keeping a weirded-out Eri as calm as possible.

"What's wrong with her?" she asks, shifting eyes back and forth around the empty hall of the hospital's private ward.

"Nothing." Or at least that's what he's been told. "Just an accident."

Eri blinks at him, then turns to picking at the seams of her new jacket. The marble floor of the hall has been recently cleaned. Katsuki is cold. He doesn't really have a proper winter coat.

"Is tea okay?" says blue, who's just rounded the corner with two steaming drinks in paper cups and a baggie of takeout. There's a slight tremor in her hands. She's the one who took Koharu to the hospital in the first place, after going back to the shop and finding her passed out. Considering his phone is probably a splat of cheap metal in the Hasaikai's basement, she had no way to contact Katsuki. They haven't had any sort of food, Eri and him. His growling stomach makes sure to remind him of that. "And burgers?"

He turns to the brat. "You gotta eat something."

She wets her lips and shakes her head no.

“You ain’t hungry?”

“No.” That’s a lie, and he doesn’t know how to fix it.

He takes the tea and burger blue offers. She herself sits in one of chairs on the opposite side of the door; leaves the baggie in the next one over and sips at her drink. Unwrapping the burger, Katsuki’s mouth dries and his stomach churns. It looks good, smells even better, and he *is* hungry, but swallowing anything seems like a major pain right now. He picks a chunk off like some toddler and starts eating like that, chewing slowly.

“Keep an eye on auntie going forward, yeah?” says Aoi. Katsuki cranes his neck to look at her, but she’s not looking back. Her blue hair is untied and cascades over her shoulders like a ruler-straight waterfall. “She does a lot for you—“

His nerves are too frayed to listen to this again. “I know,” he snaps.

“Do you, though?”

Hands twitching, he taps his feet on the edge of the chair’s leg. *“What* is your problem—?”

“Auntie’s sick, that’s my problem. And you causing her stress ulcers every other week isn’t helping.” Ah. This. *Don’t be a burden, is it? A little too late for that, mom.* “Do you care at all? Be honest.”

“Of course I do—“

“Not what it looks like from an outsider’s perspective you know. Auntie busted her ass to bring you back from the dead just last month and here you are pulling disappearing acts. What if I hadn’t been there and she’d bled out and died?” He flinches. “You don’t even have a mobile.”

Cuz having one helped a lot when he got kidnapped. Yeah. He tears off a chunk of the burger and gives it to Eri, who’s uneasy in her seat, staring at Aoi. She takes it and eats it without struggle, surprisingly.

“I get it, alright. You’ve been through hard stuff. That’s rough,” blue continues. “But auntie shouldn’t have to take the fallout for your mistakes. No one owes you anything. Do you think she owes you?”

“Fuck no. Not anymore.”

“Then I’m sure you get that stressing her out to the point of illness isn’t fair.” Her voice hitches at the end. It’s his fault? All her coughing, and fatigue, and strain. *I slit my wrists in front of her. That’s gotta mess a person up.*

“What do you want me to do about that? I literally can’t kill myself—”

“Woah woah,” she interrupts. “No one asked you to do that. Don’t put words in my mouth. Don’t guilt-trip me. That’s manipulative as hell kid.”

“I didn’t—“

“I, I, I, do you think about anyone outside of yourself? Do you think about how your problems impact other people?” All the fucking time. So much it’s driving him crazy. “If you did you’d be the one taking care of auntie and not the opposite.”

“At the end of the day, kid, you’re a freeloader. Auntie’s an angel of a person, so she’ll accept stragglers, especially when they can be useful. But she also gives too much of herself to the wrong people. You’re not her family, not her friend, you’re a random person. An employee she picked up on the street who takes advantage of her kindness.” She seems hurt. Genuinely. Her mouth is painted in stress lines and her eyes are blown open in poorly concealed panic.

“That’s not—“

“You don’t even realize that you’re doing it. You’ve been dealt the wrong cards and now you think you’re entitled to special treatment.”

“Okay. Stop,” he says. “First of all, you need to calm down. Second, you should’ve said you hate my guts from the start instead of pretending we’re fine.”

“I don’t hate you. I don’t even care about you. I care about auntie and her wellbeing. Anything more is you trying to victimize yourself.”

“Lady, you barely even know me,” Katsuki says sharply. “Third, I tried to get her to kick me out many times. I don’t know why she likes me but she does. Go argue with her over that, yeah? Because I can’t do anything for you—”

“If you could let me finish—“ she grinds out, stress lines deepening. Her watery aura bubbles. Katsuki hopes the pieces of burger will be enough comfort to Eri until blue gets herself back together. “I know

she cares for you. That's the whole reason you make her so stressed. She can't stop herself from caring, but you *can* stop yourself from being a burden."

"You ain't in your right mind. Want me to pack my bags or what? What the fuck do you want?" he says, using exasperation to drown out his discomfort.

"You can't pack your bags. Because she cares for you and leaving won't make her stop doing that. You *can* stop making trouble."

"Oh, *I'm sorry* for being on the wishlist of every villain I know. You think I'm asking to be kidnapped? I just *love* getting tortured. A dude I've never met with hands that smell like shit gouging my eyes out feels *fantastic*—"

"Maybe, this wouldn't be happening had you not been a piece of trash and gotten yourself abandoned by everyone from your parents to your friends, if you ever had any of those, in the first place! Then… auntie wouldn't have had to bother with you at all!" Katsuki recoils, shocked by her bitterness. Regret seems to flash in her eyes for all of two seconds before disappearing. "…But whatever. What's done is done. The issue now is that auntie is sick, and unless you get your act together, she'll only get sicker. Try to do that, will you?"

He's been trying for months. It never fucking works. He wants peace more than anyone. Doesn't she get that? Blue takes another sip of coffee, rubs her temple with her hands, and her gaze softens a little.

"Look, kid, okay. That was harsh of me," she backtracks in what Katsuki assumes is supposed to be a replacement for an apology. "I don't mean to be rude to you it's just… auntie means a lot to me… and she's… I'm…you get it."

Katsuki swallows. "Right."

The door to Koharu's room opens then and out she walks, hobbling along with her cane and a nurse right by her. Katsuki tries to look normal, and blue's tight demeanor loosens. They say their greetings and head back to the shop, leaving blue behind.

A week later they're at the living room table, working together in a slice of normality that's becoming increasingly rarer. Eri is asleep. Koharu writes and writes in a new journal, exactly what about, Katsuki is unsure. Katsuki meanwhile runs the needle wrong into the

suture pad he uses for practice and curses softly to himself. Suturing is a skill he's been working at for weeks, and while he's better at it than your average beginner (thanks to his combo of good dexterity, sewing experience, and a lifetime of having to be careful with toxic hands) running subcuticular sutures are a bitch. A hard exhale. He'll need to start over.

"Do you know Eri's birthday?" He'd be annoyed at the interruption had he not already interrupted himself.

"No idea," he admits. "She did tell me she's six."

"So old enough for first grade," Koharu says and jots something down.

Katsuki looks up at her. "You can't mean—"

"March is around the corner— three weeks, a month or so? The news says the academic year starts on April twelfth. Eri could go with the rest of the kids."

Recalling her stress throughout their last outing and the crowded buzz of public elementary which can get arguably worse, Katsuki frowns. "She's not your average kid."

"I'm well aware. She will not be going to an average school either. I've found this smallish one in Musutafu that's specialized in helping kids with transitioning into regular school and moving past trauma or risky quirks. Ages four to eight, and grade sizes are tiny."

"Can't I help out with her quirk?" They've been practicing on small plants to decent success. She can unwilt an unwatered flower nine times out of ten. Now that it's not being pushed and strained twenty-four-seven by people like Chisaki, Eri's quirk seems to have regressed into something more muted. They routinely use up her stockpile to keep accidents at a minimum, and her current rate is one day's worth of stockpile translates to at most two days worth of rewind. Nothing particularly efficient— Katsuki's seen her do far more, but it's manageable.

"You can, but you can't also become her tutor in everything else. I doubt she even knows how to read or write." Katsuki knows for a fact she doesn't. "You're a smart kid, but you're not qualified for that. And the longer we keep her away from regular school, the harder it will be for her later to adapt to a normal life. We can't keep her cooped up like this forever."

“I…”

“You yourself shouldn’t be using your quirk handling either.”

“About that, when will we reopen the shop?” It’s been on and off for weeks. This last one they didn’t open at all.

“Soon. When we do, you have to drop it.” His heart sinks. “The quirk handling part, I mean. You can still work as a clerk.”

“Why?!” *That’s the one thing I’m good for.*

“Because it’s making you detach from your body?” Ah right. He forgot about that. Two years left to live or whatever. “My hypothesis is that the rate at which you disconnect is lower the less you interact with quirks and the quirk plane. We’ll wait another month to do a measurement and make sure. If the rate is the same and it’s rather a plain time limit issue, then you can keep working with quirks, if it’s lower… we’re gonna take the route that keeps you alive the longest.”

He opens his mouth to protest but closes it again. She’s right. Eri’s living with them now too. He can’t be irresponsible like that.

“I don’t want to hear you complaining about not earning your keep either.

“What the fuck am I supposed to do then?”

“You’ll go to school too,” she says as if it should be obvious. “You can’t stay a high school dropout forever.”

“I’m not a—“ On second thought. “I guess I am.” He can’t go to school though. He’s legally dead, wanted by about a dozen people, and a criminal. He’s got no documents, no IDs or registration numbers. He’s a fugitive. Showing up at any half-decent institution will get him awarded a pretty pair of handcuffs. “I’m also cheating prison.”

Koharu sighs, decidedly fed up with his constant mentions of prison, and flips through the cream pages of her hardbound journal. “There are always online classes—“

“—which I’d need identification to sign up for.” He shakes his head. “The logistics of this are ridiculous, healer hag.”

“They’re difficult but not impossible. You could very well continue as my understudy, but it would earn you no certifications. Say you want

to get a job as a medical professional in the future. No one would accept a makeshift diploma from the 'healer hag school of medicine' as an actual qualification."

Katsuki can feel the heat of a flush as he realizes he's assumed he'd keep working here for a long time, perhaps indefinitely.

you think you 're entitled to special treatment

How could he have jumped the gun on something so big? He bites his tongue and stops himself from expressing the childish desire.

"I don't have documents," he argues futilely.

"We'll get them."

"What?"

"Documents—for you and Eri. I know someone. He's coming on Sunday to get your biometric information. You'll be getting brand new IDs."

That's insane. What kind of connections does healer hag have?!

"I've knows this guy for ages. He's helped me before—"

"With what?!"

"—and he's got direct access to the population registry. Haruki's hospital will make your faux birth records, you'll get new names—"

"This sounds crazy, you know that?"

She shrugs. "I don't want you two to be limited in what you can and can't do."

"By my felonies."

"Enough of that, I swear boy. Perhaps no one in your old life even sought to give you a proper chance, but I do. I think you deserve a do-over." She notes his silence. "Of course, it's up to you whether you accept or not. Eri has no birth records anyway according to my contact, so creating them for her would be harmless, but you're old enough to make your own decisions. I don't want to force you. The only thing I'll forbid you from doing is using your quirk handling until we understand it more, and that's as your doctor. Anything more is your call."

A fresh start. An opportunity to live a brand new life unmarred by the shit over shit he's suffered and made other people suffer. *I gotta move on.* He's been saying that a lot. Here's the tangible chance at it. Even his name can be rewritten. Mom and dad at the booth in Naboo come to mind, his indefinite parting with Kirishima, his physical inability to properly discuss the old dream that used to be the entire reason he powered through life… This is what he wants, isn't it? Moving on.

Isn't it?

"Eri's new school," he says, changing the subject. "Are you sure about it? She doesn't just have problems with her quirk."

"It's specialized," Koharu says after a brief pause courtesy of the sudden change of subject. "They've got psychologists and quirk therapists as part of the staff. Confidentiality policy too."

Something like that sounds too good to be true. Maybe it's the fact that Katsuki's experiences with 'quirk therapists' are sour at best, or that the entire concept of a school for kids with risky quirks sounds exclusionary and controlling and borderline weird, or just his paranoia, but he can't help but feel uneasy. Plus, if the place is serious enough about their confidentiality policy they'll keep secret a brat that's essentially kidnapped, there's no telling in what other directions their questionable morals stretch. It's at times like this that he considers he may be in over his head; how much easier it would be for Eri if she wasn't living on the run. Then again, she'd likely end up in a similar institution anyway…

Healer hag coughs. "They're people I've worked with before, Katsuki. Good people."

"And I'm fucking paranoid! You weren't there when she had an anxiety attack last week. She's vulnerable and I bet my ass there are so many psychos who'd love to get their hands on her quirk."

"…We don't have to reveal her real quirk. Those new IDs include new quirk registration. We can just say her quirk is her horn, a simple mutation type."

"Then she has to hide it."

“Something else then. We’ll figure it out. It’s better than keeping her here with no contact to the outside world.” Koharu says. “Is that what you’re planning on doing? Because it’s not sustainable. Rewind is the quirk she’s been born with, for better or worse. She’ll always be a potential target as long as she has it, like all the other millions of people with strong quirks. It is what it is. It’s how this world works. Face it head-on and give her a chance instead of sheltering her for life.”

He can’t argue with that.

Katsuki straightens Eri’s hair, making sure her bangs fall properly. They were told to make “simple but effective” changes to their appearances. Eri agreed to cut her hair, so Katsuki gave her a makeshift bob which they dyed a temporary golden blonde. It doesn’t look half bad. Katsuki gave himself the same hair color too since they’re meant to be siblings and all. It’s strange, considering this spray-dyed wheat yellow is so much closer to his original hair color than the discolored white he has now. He’s gelled down his hair and put on orange-gold contacts (“It’s a family trait. Everyone has them,” Koharu says as she places the pack of lenses on his desk.). Glasses are allowed in the photo as long as his eyes are visible, so he’s keeping them on too.

The shop’s front room has been transformed into a photo studio. With a chair and white background screen, large box lights illuminating the space evenly, plus the actual photographer, it’s the real deal. Aside from the photo stuff, there are also various other devices strewn about. Fingerprint powder and blotter paper, because Katsuki is a pesky fuck whose fingerprints won’t show up through regular machines, a pocket printer and several stamp seals, a portable scanner shaped like a stick.

Koharu’s friend the photographer and identity fraudster adjusts the big ass film camera placed in front of the shooting background with a pencil in his mouth. He’s an old guy, with salted hair thinning and frown lines etched onto either side of his lips. Growing up Katsuki often heard Deku referred to as plain, but this dude takes plain to a whole new level. There’s almost an invisible quality to him. Take your eyes away and you’ll forget he’s there. The mist of his aura likely has something to do with it.

Shashin or something of the line, he introduces himself. He’s got an accent. Katsuki will stick to photo fraud.

“Ready,” he says in a monotone, and motions for Katsuki to sit down in front of the camera.

They’re hoping Katsuki being a ghost effects only digital cameras that rely on electrical signals, rather than old school mechanical ones, which is why they’ve got this hunk of a machine here. Under the bright strobes, he begins sweating. A bead runs down the back of his neck. He keeps his eyes open and peeled on the polished lens, feeling watched like never before. The shutter click is brief but loud. On the side of the camera box is a slit, out of which a large three-by-four piece of film flies. With remarkable reflexes, photo fraud has caught it before it’s hit the ground, then begun to shake it back and forth.

Katsuki stays in the uncomfy stool, for some reason still nervous. He’s seen the one-off old movie and knows shaking the film like that is supposed to help it develop faster. He also knows you need a dark room for proper film photography. This room is at present the opposite of dark. Are they sure photo fraud knows what he’s doing?

The picture he’s presented two seconds later, crisp and clean, interference minimal, answers the question for him.

“That’s fast as hell,” Katsuki says as he stares at the photo. He looks odd, different, out of place. His hair is too flat, too bright, his eyes the wrong color, his skin translucent pale, and his jawline sharper than he remembers.

“Technology,” says photo fraud in a half-assed attempt at explanation, before taking the film away to get a better look at it. He makes some thoughtful faces then nods in satisfaction. “Get up.” Katsuki flusters and stands up too fast. “Girl next.”

“What do I do?” she whispers as Katsuki is helping her sit straight.

“Keep your eyes open and look bored to death.”

Eri’s turn takes two attempts. Photo fraud quickly kills the box lights once they’re done with them. Curious, Katsuki follows him to the counter where he’s set up the rest of his equipment. Within minutes he’s got the pictures scanned and imported into photoshop. A brush here, a morph tool there, and their features are enough altered that Katsuki can see a made-up family resemblance if he tries. Eri is too young to deal with contact lenses, so photo fraud makes her eyes yellower digitally. Editing takes five minutes if they’re being generous. Efficient motherfucker.

“Fingerprints,” orders photo fraud next, moving on to the next machine. It’s easier than he expected. The old man mixes some sort of powder into a bottle of ink, allows the ink to saturate a blank spongy ink pad, tells Katsuki to press his fingers in there, and presents him a piece of grippy cardstock to leave his inked up prints on. The image is then scanned and fed into software that converts it to the same format as scans produced by digital machines. Easy as that. Looking at the prints on the laptop screen, Katsuki can’t help but notice the ones from the left hand don’t match those from the right. Those on the right are stereotypically fingerprint-looking, those on the left are smudged and wobbly. Because Overhaul took off and refitted Katsuki’s right hand, so the prints are probably no longer his originals. His left was left alone, but years of exploding palms will earn you thick ass callouses, so the prints have been all but sanded away. He supposes it works in his favor.

“Plenty ways to do it,” says photo fraud in his somewhat shitty Japanese. “Example. Make a mold of finger, cast with resin, paint in your skin color then scan. Voila. This way easier though.” He’s got no idea of proper tonal differences in the syllables of every word so he sounds bored no matter what he’s saying.

Healer hag steps into the room while Katsuki is guiding Eri on how to press her fingers into the digital machine she’s fine to use.

“Everything alright, Charles-kun?” Apparently, nothing means yes in Charles photo fraud language (why the fuck is this fuck even named fucking Charles?!) because Koharu follows up with a: "Good to know." She gets closer and peeks at what they're doing. “They’re still using fingerprints?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“Why wouldn’t they be?” Katsuki questions when it looks like neither of them has any interest in elaborating.

“A fifth of the population has mutant quirks, more people have emission powers that work through their palms, transformation quirks that make hands disappear entirely… fingerprints are redundant when they’re something a big chunk of the population either don’t have or can easily avoid leaving.”

It’s such an obvious answer Katsuki feels dumb for not figuring it out himself. In his flashy heroism obsession, he brushed aside the fields that were considered secondary — crappy jobs for policemen or trash

underground heroes — like forensics. He used to be so narrow-minded.

“What do you use then?” Eyes present a similar problem. “DNA?”

Koharu nods. “There’s no true foolproof method. There are people out there with quirks that can alter their appearances and change their DNA, albeit temporarily. Regardless, it’s the safest method, so you have to provide a DNA sample if you want an ID.”

“How are we gonna solve that?” Kirishima told him the heroes have his DNA, and there’s a good chance they have Eri’s as well.

“You won’t be using your own. You’ll be using an evolved strain of mine. I’ve had it sent to the genetics department of the hospital to be altered enough to make you two appear of Hiryo lineage.”

“When did you have time to do that?!”

“What do you think I’ve been doing for the past month?” No wonder she ended up passing out like that. She’s been working to the bone to set this all up.

The fingerprint machine in front of them is fast replaced with two sheets of paper, colored cream, and printed with blue ink. “Fill it out,” says Charles.

It’s a form for personal information. One asking for things like name and birth-date and quirk description. The majority of the fields are already filled out. Katsuki’s new birthday is April eleventh two years prior to his real one. Under this new identity, he’ll be turning nineteen rather than seventeen in April, and on the wrong day. In fact, blank remain only the fields for height and name. The former he fills in 175 cm. The latter he hovers over.

“Pick your own name,” says Charles as he scrolls through his laptop. “Hurry.”

It wouldn’t be a good idea to use Katsuki, would it? It’s so easy to find. And yes he looks different in the photo, but not enough to be unrecognizable. If the police decided to sift through all the registered Katsukis, he’d be toast. He should change it. Yet he hesitates. He’s long given up Bakugou, but Katsuki too?

“Write your surname as Hiryo. It’ll make future paperwork easier,” advises Koharu, and passes him a business card from the hospital so

he can see the proper characters he's supposed to use. *Sun* and *remedy*. Fitting.

"What about my given name?"

"Don't have any in mind?"

"No… I want to keep Katsuki," he admits.

"You can," Charles cuts in. "Passport name does not matter. Only paperwork thing. Call yourself whatever you want in real life."

So he writes his new, never to be genuinely used name down as Shin, new — the bluntest thing possible— and hands the paper back to Charles.

"Kacchan," says Eri, tugging his shirt. "Help." She turns to stare at her paper helplessly, clearly unable to understand any of the characters. The brat definitely needs school, he thinks as he fills in the surname field with Hiryo.

"Pick a new name," he tells her.

"You pick."

"Brat. Pick."

"What kind of name? I like Eri."

"It can be anything. You don't really have to use it."

She thinks for a long time. That is five minutes. Then says, "Rin."

"Why?" There are a lot of ways to write it. Katsuki picks the character for *jewel*.

"Like an apple. *Ringo* without *go*."

Katsuki laughs. "Ya really like apples huh?"

"Mhm."

Photo fraud collects Eri's paper as well, then asks them for a quirk description.

"Mark me quirkless," Katsuki says. "It should be okay, right?"

“Quirkless people are rare. Could attract attention,” explains Charles, annoyed that he has to.

“Ugh. Electrical interference then. I make cameras funny. That good enough for ya, grandpa?”

He says nothing so it’s a yes. “The girl?”

“Mutation. Her horn.” They’re sticking with it, in the end. She’s young and quirk registrations are rarely hard set either way. It will be easy to change if the need ever arises.

All their information is collected, but photo fraud still has some things on the computer to finish, so they loiter around the shop’s front room as they wait. Eri leaves to hang with Satsu in the back. Koharu is pale, and now that they don’t have anything to do she’s started coughing every five seconds.

“That cough syrup is a scam,” Katsuki says, barely concealing his worry. “Sit the hell down. I’m making tea later.”

“You’re doting.”

“Don’t give a crap. My ginger tea works miles better than the packaged crap.”

“If you say so.”

He picks at his pajama hem.

“Who is this guy anyway? How does he make this work?”

“He’s a secret service agent—“

“Fucking hell.”

“Or an ex one at least. He’s retired. Hasn't lived over here in ages and uses a pocket entrance I made for him to travel. Worked five years on the annals of Japanese services and the rest of his career with US ones. Now he helps make new identities for people targeted by villains. Or HPSC defectors.”

“HPSC *defectors*? What’s there to defect from?”

“They’re mostly fine, the HPSC. But they’ve got behind-the-scenes black ops teams too. Trained assassins. When All Might was at his peak, they’d take out groups planning terrorism or villain attacks

before they happened and off heroes who didn't fit in the name of projecting an image of heroics spotless to the public."

Katsuki's eyes widen. Memory machine mentioned something shady with the Commission too, secret training programs was it? Assassinations are on a whole different scale from what he imagined.

"What gets you offed?"

"Aiding villains, being overly greedy, private scandals, attitude problems…"

"That's dumb. The public finding out their own commission has been killing heroes under arbitrary requirements sounds way worse than some shitty hero acting like a dick on TV."

Koharu shrugs. "Maybe so, but the black ops teams are definitely a thing. You know the sharpshooting hero?"

"Lady Nagant?"

"Her, yes. She was one of these assassins. Rumor is she couldn't take it anymore and killed the previous commissioner. That's why she's in prison."

"News reports said she'd gone villain." He remembers reading up on it, way back when.

"There was a reason," says Healer Hag. "Since her, they say they've quit the assassination programs, but they still have secret service agents specially trained to do the dirtier work. Hawks is one I've heard."

"The number two chicken?" You'd never think it with that guy's laissez-faire attitude. Katsuki supposes that's the point.

"Him and others. Anyone who wants to get out of those contracts and can't do it legally Charles offers to help. His quirk's called neglect. Lets him briefly confound people and lower their attentiveness so he can mess with systems and alter documents undetected."

"Isn't that illegal quirk use?"

"He has an international hero license."

"Ah." Not that quirk prohibitions are super strictly enforced or followed anyway. Photo fraud signals for Katsuki, and they pack up

his supplies together. All in all, they fit into two large hard cases. Charles hauls them with ease and only now does Katsuki notice the lines of muscle beneath his shirt.

“Four days documents ready,” he tells them. “I will send by mail to the hospital.”

“Thank you, Charles-kun. How much will it be?”

“For you nothing—“

“Oh no, I can’t—“

“Nothing, Sensei. It’s repayment.”

“Well, alright,” Koharu concedes. “Thank you again.”

Four days later on the clock blue niece leaves the sealed box of every document they could possibly need from passports to family trees to school records to medical records, to ID cards, all crisp and mint and orderly in the front room of the shop.

Days trickle by.

February becomes March. Katsuki enrolls in an online preparatory course for the chemical engineering branch of Tokyo University.

The thing about hero schools many casual aspirants don’t realize is that what kicks applicants in the nuts most often isn’t the practical exam, but the theoretical one. It’s extremely rare for graduates to ever attend university. Many hero schools, with UA at the helm, make up for that fact by making the academic part of the education they offer grueling. Unlike typical trade high schools where depending on your trade various subjects will be treated as a joke, UA takes *every* subject seriously. You’re a year ahead.

UA’s entrance exam has concepts in it you’re only supposed to learn after your first high school year. UA’s first year is everyone else’s second. By the time you’ve graduated, you should have covered concepts advanced enough to be considered university level.

That’s the standard for a school that only accepts one in three hundred for their hero course. Out of roughly twelve thousand applicants, only forty make it in. Thinking about losing that makes him ill. *Don’t think about it.*

Don’t.

Katsuki being the overachiever he is, studied two years ahead. So theoretically, a year of prep course and he should land a spot in uni. He’ll need to work his ass off, but that’s nothing new. The course is flexible and will only take up the half of the day Eri will eventually be in school during, so he can pay proper attention to her for the rest of it. His medical studies with Koharu he’ll keep up on the side.

Koharu’s breaths are short, stunted, sharp.

“You good?” Katsuki asks, setting the tea in front of her.

“Yes.” She doesn’t look it. “Thanks.”

Blue niece is a Tokyo University graduate, and she’s still taking a master's course at the place too. She's familiar with the campus. Katsuki isn't. He’d rather not get lost on registration day. He’s supposed to pick up some materials the university offers for free. So here he is, in Aoi’s vanilla-scented car, front shotgun this time, with that same bubblegum pop song playing through the speakers.

“I think she’s getting sicker,” he confesses, watching blue’s hands tighten on the steering wheel. Blue sighs. “What is it that she has exactly?”

“You don’t know?” she says.

“No,” he grits out.

“They’re not entirely sure. A form of idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis. It causes thickening and scarring in her lung tissues and makes it harder for her to breathe. Messes up the circulatory system as well.”

“What’s the cure?”

“…None. It’s terminal. Some medicines help temporarily, but how long you’ll live is honestly random. Auntie’s had hers since she was my age. It’s acted up like this before. Ten years ago it was even worse than now.”

And if healer hag's still alive, that means there's a chance she'll get over it again.

"We're here." Katsuki unclasps his seat belt. "Rendezvous at noon. That okay?"

He nods, they exchange phone numbers and go their separate ways.

His skin crawls at the line to registration. He double and triple checks his papers are in order — ID, application slip, and the pass he paid a good five thousand yen for— as he's trying to stop himself from hopping back and forth. Hair flattened and collared shirt well-pressed, he looks unlike himself, but still, he's expecting someone to jump from a nearby bush and attack him with handcuffs. He's number five in line. This line is too fucking long. This air is too fucking dry.

"What are you applying for?" He startles at being addressed and turns towards the person sixth in line, a tall guy with a fluffy bowl cut of brown hair and aubergine aura.

He wants to snap at the guy to stuff it and kick himself away. He can't do that. He's supposed to be acting normal.

"Prep course," he says shortly.

"Me too!" the stranger smiles, waving his own papers; holding them in a way that makes it impossible to tell what's actually written on them.

"Great." This is so dumb.

The girl in front of him finishes up and he's infinitely grateful for the easy escape.

"Number five?" questions the elderly secretary. Katsuki holds up his number tag and she nods, beckoning him closer. Katsuki hands in his pass and application slip then fills in another form. He almost fucks up his birthday. It takes the secretary two tries to get Katsuki to respond to Hiryo-san.

The stranger with the purple aura smiles at him as he's leaving.

On the day memory machine mails him that report on all the information available on him he'd requested way back, Koharu is so sick she doesn't even get out of bed.

She tells Katsuki to pick out *pirfenidone* from the drawers up front. It helped last time, she says.

The next day she gets better, the one after that she gets worse. It goes on like that, a see-saw, a constant back and forth.

Eri takes to doodling. Katsuki gives her a full pack of crayons on the first Friday of March, by the next one half of them are broken and the rest smeared on a hundred sheets of paper. Some are good-looking some borderline disturbing. Satsu rips half of them. She replaces them with more. When Koharu becomes sick enough she needs an oxygen mask to breathe without strain and it's no longer feasible to keep her at home, Eri pastes the colorful drawings all over the wall of her hospital room. They set up a pocket entrance to get there whenever they need. Katsuki keeps the shop open for two or three hours a day by himself. He studies the journals harder. Measures his own quirk levels to find that Koharu's hypothesis was right, and they've only gone up by fifty.

"It got this bad last time too," blue tells him. It's about the only reassurance he's got.

His parenting book tells him he should paint school as something exciting in order to make sure Eri is excited too, so that's what he does. Makes school seem like the best place in the fucking world. Makes sure not to lie either. He buys her stupidly easy kid's storybooks and the cutest fucking backpack. It's amazing how cool you can make the most ordinary thing seem with a slight change in perspective.

They've returned from the walk to the beach they like to do every morning and have finished breakfast too when Eri shoves one of her picture books in Katsuki's face.

The bear played, says the text, and it shows an image of a cartoon bear swinging on a swingset.

"What's that?"

"A swing," Katsuki says. "You sit your ass on that wood plank and swing back and forth."

"That's fun?"

“It can be.” He hadn’t been the type of kid who gave a crap about jungle gym and playground toys. He was busy almost burning forests down while playing explosion hero vs villain with trees.

“I wanna try.”

So they locate two lengths of solid rope, a drill, a plank of wood, and a sturdy tree branch. Two holes in the plank and four knots later, they’ve got a shitty makeshift swing. Katsuki didn’t account for Eri being fucking tiny, because when he sits her on the swing measured to him, her feet don’t reach far enough for her to kick off the ground herself. She looks around, opens and closes her hands around the rope, evidently confused and underwhelmed. Katsuki takes pity on her. She hmphs as he pulls her backward, then yelps when she’s let go and starts to swing back and forth. Any fear quickly dissipates and soon she’s smiling so widely.

“Kacchan, I’m flying!” she says.

April eleventh. The evening before Eri’s first day of school.

They’re visiting Koharu at the hospital— brought her some home-cooked meals and company. She seems a little better; hasn’t needed the oxygen mask today. Eri shows her new drawings one by one from the foot of the bed, bright and animated. When Koharu seems better it rubs off on Eri too, and it’s easier for her to let the filter go.

“I have gifts for you two,” she says and motions for Katsuki to open the drawer of the nightstand. Inside he finds two green things, knitted with soft yarn. They’re hats. With eyes on them.

“There was a program on TV and I wanted to pass the time,” she explains. “So I made frogs. Since it’s your new birthday.”

“This is the dumbest thing I’ve ever seen,” he says, blushing as he puts it on anyway. There’s a mirror on the front wall of the room. On Eri, it looks good. Katsuki meanwhile looks like a wannabe five-year-old. Or a strawberry with pale blond fuzz—that’s how red he is.

“Aoi left a film camera in the drawer. Take a picture won’t you?”

“No fucking way.”

“Memories are good to have you know boy.” She coughs. “You don’t have a single thing to lose.”

He does take the picture. It’s nowhere near as clear as the passport shot that Charles guy took of him, and they’re both making dumb-ass facial expressions, but he feels a twist in his chest and takes a couple more, including Koharu too.

Soon they bid her goodnight and hop back home. Katsuki tucks Eri in once they’re done with their nighttime routine.

“I’m kinda scared Kacchan,” she whispers. "About tomorrow."

“You’ll be fine.” At least he hopes so.

Chapter End Notes

1) i hope aoi didn't come off too strong. i wanted to show her fraying from stress
2)a lot of worldbuilding this chapter
3) I've been recently renewing my own documents, and it just so happened to oincide with the events of this fic. i did research for passport photo requirements in japan because different countries have different ones. in mine you can't wear glasses and your eyebrows have to be showing clearly, so bangs clipped up. in others you can't have any sort of jelwery, including thin necklaces. it's pretty interesting. made me think bout the redundancy of fingerprints in their world too where people can have straight-up claws.
4) my mom always jokes that she has no fingerprints because she does a lot of manual work ((loves gardening) and her hands are usually super rough, so whenever she goes to renew her passport, it takes a long time for the clerks to get her fingerprints to show up on the machine XD
5) I've restarted classes, so the update schedule might start to stagnate a little. I'll try my best but i also don't want to fail so XD
6) katsuki going to hand in a registration form is somewhat based on the uni procedures in my country but most of it is fiction. idek if tokyo uni offers prep courses. it's for the sake of the plot
7) snuck lady nagant in there. imma be honest i thought the whole black ops assassin miniplotline of hers that lasted all of two chapters was questionably done and I'm not gonna attempt to improve on it. we will be getting a mini closure on the HPSC plot this arc tho so yeah
8) pulmonary fibrosis is an IRL illness, the thing koharu has is just slightly altered to serve again, plot
9) I'm hyped for the two chapters coming after this one because there are moments in them I've thought about writing for a long

long while
10) someone will be making a comeback next chapter
11) ninety nine percent of the new identity stuff is also fiction
12) ive been watching the MCU lately because i hadn't before. it's cool but im seeing all the films out of order lmao
13) i also watched a star wars movie for the first time ever to finally understand where aldera came from. Naboo street from last chapter is named after a star wars location

Chapter 25: Inescapable

Chapter Summary

Eri goes to school. Katsuki has a mild breakdown. Featuring exposure therapy.

(nothing that hasn't been tagged before)

Chapter Notes

heyy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Why’d you even transfer here, Todoroki-san?” asks Kanagawa. She really seems to love every excuse to say Fuyumi’s family name like a sideline reporter poorly concealing their excitement. Fuyumi shuffles her notebooks out of her bag. It’s often that she wishes she could skip the fanfare that comes with people knowing her family name.

They’ve just finished the morning teacher’s meet. It’s eight am. Soon students will begin to show up. All the cleaning and preparation was handled yesterday, in advance. Now, they wait.

“I’ve always wanted to.”

“Work with problematic kids?” She whispers the last part. Fuyumi frowns.

“Help kids feel more comfortable in their own skins.”

“Is there a particular reason?”

There is. Fading red hair and exhausted blue eyes blown wide and searching every which way for flitters of acceptance and recognition. Touya stopped venting to her when Fuyumi was eight and he was nine, because “you and mom don’t understand”. Touya had no one but a younger and confused Natsu to rely on and it’s safe to say it did *not* work out.

“My brother used to have trouble with his quirk growing up. It would hurt him.”

“Has he improved now…?”

“He’s dead.” Rather a villain. A very bad one. But the only people who know that fact are her, Natsu, Shouto, and Shouto’s friend (?) Bakugou. Kanagawa’s cheeks hollow as if she’s sucked on a particularly sour lemon.

“Ah,” she says. “My apologies Todoroki-san. I shouldn’t have pried. I’m sorry for your loss.”

Dad hadn’t covered up Touya’s death or anything — the incident caused a massive forest fire that couldn’t go unexplained, and it was broadcast on several local news stations while they still hoped to find Touya alive — but it isn’t super common knowledge either.

“It’s been a long time,” Fuyumi admits. “It hurts a little less.” *Not really*.

“So due to him, you’ve decided to work here? How noble, Todoroki-san.”

“No, no. I love children in general too.”

“Even so, many of our teachers don’t stay more than two or three terms.” Fuyumi knows Kanagawa has been here for a few years despite being barely older than her because she was listed as one of the first staff members on the school’s webpage. “The kids… I love them, don’t get me wrong, but they can be emotionally exhausting. It’s hard enough running a regular preschool where only one or two kids will have the crazy pesky quirks, but here, everyone is like that. And it’s up to us to teach them control. That scares a lot of people.”

Fuyumi shrugs. It motivates her if she’s honest. If she can do even the smallest thing to stop new Touyas from popping up, she’ll do it and work double time. Maybe it’s a guilty conscience thing. Like dad’s fifty flame sidekicks not a single one of which ended up ever being Touya because Touya is on the news for committing arson and torturing children.

Someone calls for Kanagawa from the other side of the room. Left with nothing else to do, Fuyumi skips over a pile of papers on the staff room floor to head into the hall. Her room, 1-1, is at the very end of this hall. She took care yesterday to paint a pretty flower mural around the door frame. *Musutafu Minami Early Prep School*, or Minami Early for the average passer-by, is a lot more lenient than your standard public school. Rather than a traditional classroom format, with lined-up desks and four morning periods, it’s a mix of classroom and daycare. These kids have attention issues, learning disabilities,

language problems, or even various traumas on top of their often volatile quirks. To help them better adjust, schedules and lesson plans are flexible. A combo of both work and play to make for a more natural transition. Their quirk training program is their most popular, since it provides kids with pro quirk specialists to help them work with their powers in a safe way, something super important when quirks keep getting stronger and stronger with every generation.

The large classroom has been split into two parts. The front has ten desks lined up in groups of two, facing the blackboard and illuminated by the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the outdoor garden; the back is a carpet floored section lined with bookcases and shelves of colorful supplies. Fuyumi sits at the upright piano and lifts the key lid. She plays a Sol, then a si. Despite appearances, it's an electronic piano. Easier maintenance. Her fingers brush over the smooth keys, pressing them methodically to fill the room with the moody tune of Tchaikovsky's Romance in F Minor. The notes mix with footsteps and rattling wind on the window frame and voices and laughter. She messes up a few times and stops when the stranger at the door has been waiting for a good two minutes.

It's a teenage looking boy, dressed in baggy black from head to toe, hair pressed down heavily into a stiff bowl cut, skin so pale the wall is brighter than him, and thin-rimmed glasses framing yellow-orange eyes. He has no presence whatsoever, and Fuyumi is sure she heard no footsteps. However, she recognizes him. An eighteen-year-old coming to sign up their sister with parents nowhere in sight is bound to make for a memorable and eyebrow-raising kid's report. Fuyumi asked of course, *where are the parents, what does the boy do, where do they live?* The principal said, *they're part of the Hiryo clan*, and that's enough for someone like Fuyumi (who is somewhat familiar with important clans and families courtesy of being paraded around on dad's rare official outings and grandma Himura's penchant for gossip) to understand it's classified information.

"Good morning Hiryo-san," she says, standing up and getting closer. The boy, as if he's having trouble remembering his own name, takes a moment to register her

"That wasn't shitty," he says, referring to her playing. She's not sure if it's supposed to be a compliment.

"You're familiar with classical music?"

"Used to play, way back." His voice is smooth but strained.

“Piano?”

He nods. “And percussion mostly. Drums.”

Fuyumi doesn’t say, *you look it*, as much as she wants to.

“You’re here to ask about Rin, I assume?”

“Rin— yeah, Rin. She’s lined up in the gym with all the other brats for the opening ceremony.” His eyes shift to scan the room’s every nook and corner with careful care.

“I’m Todoroki Fuyumi, and I’ll be Rin’s homeroom teacher this year,” Fuyumi says, bowing briefly.

“Todoroki?” he repeats, even more strained.

“Yes. Is there a problem? You might have heard of my father—“

“Nah, no problem,” he says. “ We weren’t notified of homeroom teacher placements and your name wasn’t on the school’s website so I was surprised.” That’s because she’s new and their IT department is a little hopeless. “Endeavor is um… a great hero, yes, totally. Nice to meet you.” He bows in return with the stiffness of someone who despises etiquette norms. He doesn’t seem the fanboy type, but his flustered reaction suggests otherwise. Fuyumi saves him further embarrassment by offering a smile.

“Gotta pick her up at two pm?”

“That’s when official school hours end. You’d best come a little earlier today since it’s the first, and later on, we stay open until six pm if you’re ever too busy.”

“Noted.”

“You’re her brother?”

“…Yeah. Our parents are… out of commission.” That is by far the weirdest word choice Fuyumi has ever heard anyone use to refer to their parents, and she’s been working with three to five years olds for years. “So I take care of her.”

“You seem pretty young.”

“Just turned nineteen.” Natsu’s age. She thinks of Natsu with a six-year-old too long and she might pass out from the second-hand stress.

“It must be difficult.”

“She’s a good kid. I’m more difficult than her to be honest.”

Fuyumi snorts. “Anything specific I should keep in mind?”

“Nothing that ain’t on her file and journal.” Anxiety issues, lack of any sort of formal education thus far, sensory issues that force her to wear gloves, intense fear of plague masks and problems with nightmares, plus stingy with trust… it’s a mess of a cocktail Fuyumi has trouble understanding how a kid has concocted. There are a lot of questions she wants to ask and a lot of avenues to be picked apart (Why the anxiety? *Where* are the parents? Why plague masks of all things? *Where are the parents?!)* but Hiryo described everything in terms that seem deliberately vague in the file and she’s not in the mood to wreck their rapport from the first day by playing investigator. “Oh, and she prefers to go by Eri. It’s a nickname.”

Another question to be asked another day makes its way into Fuyumi’s mental file. For now, she takes him at face value and nods.

“Thank you for your help Hiryo-san. You can call the front office at any time if you have any concerns or notifications for us. Rest assured we’ll do our bests to take care of Rin.”

“You better,” he says and turns heel to leave. In the hall, Fuyumi quickly loses sight of him among all the other parents and kids and teachers. What a weird guy. There’s something artificial and plastic about him she can’t explain. His face is a ghost of someone familiar yet not, and the way he carries himself tells her there’s *a lot* of self-restraint being exercised.

She looks at her watch to find it’s only ten minutes to the start of assembly and her brief contemplation is forgotten in favor of rushing to the gym.

The gym smells of detergent for wooden floors. Eri runs her fingers across the grooves of the hardwood, back and forth, left and right, determined to ignore the mess of motion around her.

It felt like a betrayal, she won’t lie, when Kacchan had them stop walking in front of the double doors of this big place for sports apparently called a gym and told Eri to say goodbye and go sit down with her classmates; this line of scary also six-year-olds doing everything from taking their indoor shoes on and off to jumping

around when they're supposed to be sitting to eating hair. And her classmates make up only a single row of the dozens of rows in the gym, with kids both older and younger. They're sat around the center of the room— Eri is third from the stage— and the younger kids to their left are so loud Eri's ears might start to bleed. She has to dodge someone firing off pens like bullets with what appears to be a catapult quirk, and this kid that can turn into jelly slime keeps transforming and spraying them with bits of goop each time.

The girl in front of her has black hair curled into big ringlets, while the boy behind her has a Satsu-like face and keeps stretching in weird positions. All his sentences end with a *nya* and she's sure it's not part of his quirk. What are these people?

More and more kids continue to pile in, while the teachers walking between the rows and making sure everyone is sat in order seem to Eri like giants. She tries to smile when the girl in front of her turns around, but whatever her face turned into puts said girl off, because her lip curls and she turns her head away without a word.

Then the lights dim, and dim, and dim, covered by curtains, before being replaced by bright spotlights illuminating the stage. The hall falls finally silent. Eri squints up at the podium framed by lavish velvet curtains and the rows of smiling teachers seem like dolls arranged with careful care. Behind the spot with the microphone are a stool and a big black boxy thing. A person who looks like a stuffed animal, a bear to be exact, fabric skin and all, sits down on the little stool. She's not sure how to describe it, but their skin falls around the stool like an unfilled pillow, obscuring part of it. Their hands start to move, why Eri's not sure. She hears a noise and flinches. Then another. And another. But they're not bad noises. Strung together like this, they sound beautiful. With the light focused on stuffed bear person and their music box machine, it's easy to lose herself in the melody and forget she's not the only one in the hall.

However, the notes fizzle out, the curtains are drawn a little more open, and the bear person leaves their spot to make room for this old man to step on the podium.

"Welcome to the new year at Musutafu Minami Early Preparatory School. We hope this one will be as great as the last, and to our new arrivals, we hope you'll enjoy it as much as we have—"

He talks a lot, this old man. Eri loses the thread of what he's talking about fast, opting to look at the clock over top of him instead. She

knew how to read time at Chisaki's. The old man takes a quarter-hour to finish. Then they're told to get up and walk in neat lines to their classrooms. Eri's desk is supposed to have her name on it, and for a moment she almost forgets it's Hiryo Rin now. The girl next to her is called Ibara Suzuki, and as luck would have it, she's as reluctant to talk to Eri as Eri is to her.

Kacchan said to make friends, and have fun, and ask as many questions as she wants. Throughout the first period, math, Eri makes no friends, has little fun, and asks zero questions. Not a good start. She's horrible at this. She misses Satsu. Granny's frog hat, they tell her, is a 'dress code violation'. The girl in front of her, still the one with black ringlets, complains that the color of the chalk is wrong and promptly starts floating all the chalk in the room with some kind of quirk. Devil horns grow out of her head. Her name is Rebecca according to her nameplate. She threatens to call her mother. Her next-door seat neighbor starts crying like a high-pressure faucet. Eri's feet only graze the floor, so they don't get wet, but the much taller Ibara has to maneuver and sit cross-legged to avoid the flood. The Satsu-like kid from earlier has a sister that looks like a dog and they're ripping up their notebooks instead of writing down one plus one and two plus two. It's so much, too much. Eri covers her ears and stares hard at her first-grader math flash cards. At least Fuyumi-sensei is pretty.

During lunchtime, Eri chooses to focus on perfectly aligning her lunch mat with her table, corner to corner, instead of attempting to get involved in the chatter all around her. She puts her chopsticks to her left and takes out her toothbrush. They're supposed to brush their teeth here at their desks then go rinse their mouths in the bathroom. Said bathroom is crowded —more than a few people bump into Eri— but she manages to worm her way in front of the big basin.

When they come back to class there's a small cart of food by the door. Fuyumi-sensei asks them to line up one by one and get their plate. Today's menu is chicken curry she says. They also get a carton of milk, a bread roll, and a great big apple slice (Eri can't help but smile when she sees it, her first natural one of the day) as dessert. The food tastes good, much better than she expected— definitely better than the stuff Chisaki used to give her ("Who cares about the quality of her food, I'll push reload when it's needed." He'd do it when she got sick too, deconstruct and reconstruct her with any pathogens gone.) Not as good as Kacchan's though.

The strange part comes after they've finished their servings.

"There's a bread roll, an apple, and about one and a half servings of curry left. Whoever's still hungry can come up here and play rock paper scissors with me. You beat me you win the food, okay?" Eri perks up. A chance to win the apple? She already finished her own. She wants it. She wants it *bad*. "First up, anyone who wants the bread roll line up now." But she's got no idea what this rock paper scissors is, and the three kids fighting for the bread roll are vicious, pushing each other to be first in line until Fuyumi-sensei scolds them and they calm down.

Eri doesn't want to get pushed around, but she wants the apple. Her stomach is begging her for the apple. She stands abruptly, turns toward Suzuki, and opens her mouth. Nothing comes out.

"…Are you okay?" Suzuki asks quietly, blinking at her. Eri's mouth keeps opening and closing without sound. She means to ask, what's rock paper scissors, but the prospect seems suddenly daunting.

"Yeah," she manages and opts to observe what the other kids are doing instead of embarrassing herself.

Rock paper scissors apparently involves shouting *Rock Paper Scissors Go! a*nd making a shape with your hand. You can keep it open, you can make it into a fist and you can hold two out like a peace sign. Two people do it at the same time, and certain shapes win over others. But she's only able to understand that peace sign loses against fist before the bread roll has been won and it's time to line up for the apple.

It's sitting on a plate next to Fuyumi-sensei, looking delicious. Eri can imagine the perfect combination of sweet and tart melting in her mouth. "Hiryo-chan, let's start." Sensei's words snap Eri out of her apple-fueled daydream, and she feels small playing this game she doesn't know against a woman she just met. Part of her wants to snatch the apple and eat it, forget weird games, but the other part of her knows that's not allowed and doing things that aren't allowed will get her punishments. She hates punishments.

Eri doesn't say *Rock Paper Scissors Go!* along with Fuyumi-sensei, and in her stress uses peace sign, which Sensei easily defeats with fist. She walks back dejected, and the cat boy proceeds to win the apple slice by using open hand to beat fist. He won the bread roll too—that's just unfair. Kacchan told her to be nice, and that's the only reason she's not stealing it.

She definitely *doesn't* stomp back to her seat and stare at her apple-less plate. She's been spoiled by Kacchan and the endless apples at home. She knows she's being dramatic.

"Didn't win?" asks Suzuki. Eri shakes her head.

"Want mine?" She turns around so fast. True to word Suzuki's apple is untouched on her plate. But… would it be rude to take it?

"Can I…?"

Suzuki pushes the plate towards her. "Sure. I thought I was hungry enough and that's why I grabbed one. Guess I wasn't."

"You're sure?"

"Yup."

She moves the plate to her own table and takes a big bite out of the apple slice. "Thank you…"

"Suzuki is fine, Suzu-chan too."

"I'm Eri."

"Your name isn't Rin?"

"Shit." She forgot.

"That's a bad word."

"Oh shit." She covers her mouth, catching herself.

"Another one."

"Eri is my… other name… nickname?" she scrambles to explain.

"Got it… nice to meet you, Eri-chan."

Despite her first break with Suzuki, they don't talk much for the rest of the day. They've got a PE period last, and Eri is strung to the highest setting. They change inside a room with little cubbies, her PE hat is apparently multicolored, and she doesn't remember how to write the kanji for her name on her shirt sticker. The PE teacher is a whole different person, and she misses Fuyumi-sensei's somewhat comfortable air. He has them stretch in weird ways and pass a ball

back and forth and split up into teams to play this thing called dodge ball where your goal is to bash the opposite team with the ball until they go down. It doesn't help that their meager class of ten is not the only one there, and the gym is teeming with half a hundred kids. She lost sight of Suzuki the moment she walked inside, and the more she stays in here, listening to the squeak of shoes on hardwood and indignant shouts of *pass to me!* and flying balls she has to dodge, the more the world seems to tilt— the more the exit seems welcoming.

So to the exit she goes, slowly, avoiding all the giants they have for teachers and pushing the door open enough to slide through. The hallway is empty, and she runs back towards their classroom in the same way she used to run through the halls of the basement —making as little sound as possible.

Her breath hitches two doors away because there's music coming from the classroom, the same type stuffed bear person played at morning assembly. She hadn't noticed a music box machine in the room, but then again, she'd been trying *not* to pay attention.

Eri slows herself down further, makes her footsteps softer, until she can peek through the open door and see Fuyumi-sensei sitting at the music box machine. Her eyes are closed as she plays. Eri likes this song even more than she did the one at the assembly.

The music stops.

"Hiryo-chan?" Eri stiffens. "Why aren't you in PE?"

"Um…" She looks at the floor in self-consciousness. Will this earn her a punishment? Does she tell the truth? Does she lie? *If you ever feel sick or stressed tell a teacher. Those fucks are obligated to help you out. If they don't I'll beat their asses.* That's what Kacchan told her. "Felt sick," she manages.

"What sort of sick? Do you think you have a fever, or a stomach ache, or—?"

"Too much."

"You felt overwhelmed?"

"Yeah. Too much going on."

"Oh, I see. You're not used to seeing a lot of people at once…"

She shakes her head no.

"…And disconnecting helps you."

"Is— is that okay?"

"Of course," Fuyumi-sensei says. "It's only the first day. You've done amazing so far already."

"No problems— if I skip?"

"Well, you won't be able to skip every class, obviously." Fuyumi-sensei has a nice smile, and her eyes are bluer than the sea at home. "But you're for sure allowed to take breaks when it gets to you."

Knowing she won't get a punishment, she sighs and continues to stand there, wishing Sensei would make music on the box again. Kacchan said *It's okay to ask teachers questions. Look out for yourself but you can trust most of 'em.* She's supposed to talk a lot and make friends and learn a lot. Granny said teachers are nice. What's there to lose?

"Can you play the music box again?"

"Music box… you mean piano?"

"I've never seen one before."

Fuyumi-sensei's lips downturn, and for a moment Eri regrets speaking up, fearing she's done something wrong.

"How about you come sit next to me and I'll show you how it works. Grab your chair."

Curiosity beats out self-preservation and Eri hauls her chair behind the piano where sensei is seated. She can see now that the piano is lined with keys, big white ones and smaller black ones, too many for her to count. Some have multicolored circle stickers on them. Her teacher presses a key, and a low noise comes out. Eri can feel her eyes widen. More keys make different noises. Depending on how Sensei moves her hands, she can combine the keys to make proper music.

"How?"

"Well… this piano is digital. That means all the notes have been recorded in a sound studio, and the computer in here makes sure the speakers play the right one depending on what key you press. This here is a Fa." She presses the key called Fa to demonstrate.

“They have names?”

“Mhm. In a real piano, this big wood casing has strings inside, and every time you press a key a little hammer hits the string and makes a noise.”

“The string makes music?”

“It does when it vibrates. The people at the studio record the noises from that kind of piano to use with this one, since that kind tends to sound better.”

“So why not use the little hammer piano?”

“Because the little hammers are expensive, and that kind of piano goes out of tune really easily. Hard to move around too. This one meanwhile is cheap, easy to move, and it can make all sorts of noises.” She taps some things on a little screen and this time when she presses the button the noise is distorted and robotic. Eri prefers the regular sound, but that’s still cool. Sensei taps some things again and plays a short rising tune.

“…Can I try?”

“Sure. You’re a little low down though. Want to sit on the stool?”

She shakes her head and sticks her finger out, running it across the smooth key. It’s bouncy when she presses down, and the note almost shocks her. She looks at Fuyumi-sesnei in wonder and feels the corners of her mouth stretch.

“Try pressing all the keys with stickers on them in a row, like this.” Her fingers glide across the board as they play notes that get lower and lower. Eri can’t do it as smoothly —her hands are too small; she’s too slow and reluctant— but still, it sounds good.

“You like it? You’ll learn how to play in music class. There’s this smaller instrument called the melodica that you can play on your lap.”

“It has littler hammers?”

“Smaller, not littler and no, it doesn’t have hammers. You use your breath to play.”

“That’s cool.” Sensei plays some more tunes for her. Eri likes the woman.

“Have you been enjoying yourself today, Eri-chan?”

She startles, her preferred name making warmth rise within her.

“Is it alright if I call you that? Your brother said you like it more than your given one.”

“Yeah, I do.” If Kacchan told her, that must mean it should be fine for Eri to use it here too.

“It’s just you and your brother, at home?”

“Granny too. She made my frog hat. She’s been a little sick though.”

“Sorry to hear that. I hope she gets well soon.”

“Oh and Satsu.”

“… Murder?” Fuyumi-sensei repeats carefully.

“He’s our cat. He’s this big and he likes to sleep at the foot of my bed. He’s really furry.”

“You’re happy at home, Eri-chan?”

What kind of question is that? Is Fuyumi-sensei trying to get a particular answer out of her? Kacchan said their story is supposed to be that their mama and papa didn’t treat Eri well, so Kacchan and her moved in with their grandma. She knows Kacchan might get in trouble with the bad guys for saving her from Chisaki, so no one is supposed to find out that’s where she came from. If Fuyumi-sensei thinks Kacchan is evil, will she try to take him away? That can’t happen.

“Mhm.” And it’s the ultimate opposite of a lie. “Our house is nice, and Satsu is funny, and we have lots of apples and Kacchan takes me on walks.”

“Kacchan? Your mom?”

If it’s okay for her to use Eri, surely it’s okay for Kacchan to use Kacchan. “My brother.”

“You call him Kacchan?”

“His name— nickname is Kat— Kachu—Kachuki—“

“Katsuki?”

“Yeah. I can’t say t— chu… so I call him Kacchan.”

“Even though his name is Shin?”

She nods. The wobble in her voice works in her favor when she says, “Is—is it weird?”

“Ah, no, sweetheart. A bit unusual is all.”

The door to the classroom slams open all the way as the man Eri recognizes as their gym teacher stops in front of it, panting. He seems to melt in relief upon setting eyes on Eri.

“Oh thank god. I thought we lost track of her.”

“She’s been with me all period Yamanishi-san. It’s on me for not notifying. Slipped my mind.”

“It’s fine.” He keeps panting. “Just tell me when you’re leaving next time, okay kid? Nearly gave me a heart attack.”

Kacchan is absent-minded when she gets home, and continues to be so even while Eri gives him a detailed account of the day and talks about the piano and the little hammers.

“Fuyumi-sensei is so nice.”

“Yeah?” He manages a grimace. “I’m glad you like her.”

They’re early on the second day. Suzuki is the only other kid in class. Fuyumi-sensei gives them clearance to use the supplies from their caddy to draw while they wait for everyone to arrive. Eri peeks over Suzuki’s shoulder and spots her drawing a very muscled stick man with a V for hair. He’s all yellow and red and blue. Eri’s own paper is a poor rendition of Satsu.

“What’s that?”

“All Might, obviously.”

Eri blinks in confusion. Her bench mate scrunches her pink eyebrows. “Is it that bad Eri-chan? He’s got the hair… maybe I need the cape.”

“What’s an All Might?”

Suzuki gapes at her. Eri feels flush without meaning to.

“You don’t know All Might?!”

“… no?”

“How do you not know All Might! Everyone knows All Might!”

“Not me.”

“What about other heroes? Do you know Edgeshot, or Ryuukyuu, or Best Jeanist, or Miruko?” Every name draws a further blank. Suzuki’s face is a painting of despair. Like that screaming face Eri found on page thirteen of her art textbook.

“Don’t you watch the news at *all?*”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know any of them.” The only heroes she knows are Kacchan plus green and yellow boy from that alley with Chisaki.

Eri is kind of curious though, about this All Might and this Edgeshot and this Best Jeanist (What is a Jeanist? Are there other Jeanists, if Best Jeanist is the best one? Is there a platoon of Jeanists?). Kacchan also told her a good way to make friends is to show interest in their interests.

“What kind of heroes are they?”

Suzuki brightens. “Miruko is like a bunny, she hops around and her kicks are super strong. The commercial says she kicks bad guys into the stratosphere. My favorite hero is Edgeshot. He’s like a ninja, and his arrests are super high. All Might is the greatest hero ever. He’s retired now, but he could change the weather with a punch.”

“No way.”

“He’d go like, *whoosh*—” She mimes an upward punching motion towards the ceiling. Fuyumi-sensei chooses that moment to step back inside the room. Suzuki flusters, moving her hand down to curl a pink braid against it. She continues her story in a whisper, “And *bam*, it starts raining.”

“No way.”

“You know, I think Fuyumi-sensei’s dad is a hero too. And her

brother."

Eri watches Fuyumi-sensei's back.

"Do you have a computer at home, Eri-chan?"

She has no idea, so she says no.

"After class, let's ask to go to the computer room. I'll show you *all* the heroes."

Kacchan is a little late with picking her up today, which Eri is fine with because it gives her and Suzuki more time to see these heroes. Fuyumi-sensei stays to supervise, and she admits that her dad isn't *any* old hero, he's the *number one* hero. This big flaming guy.

"His fire beard is scary," Eri says, and Sensei laughs kind of nervously.

Suzuki is good at typing, and she can read well too. She might be a genius. Most of the good videos of heroes in action are locked, according to Suzuki, due to the school's parental controls on the computer. She listens to stories of Hawks fighting four villains at once and All Might's last stand at Kamino. As they're scrolling through images related to All Might on the search page, a particular one piques her interest. She gasps when she sees it. Because it's him. Yellow boy. The one with all the zeros on his shirt. The one who Chisaki threatened to kill. "Sir Nighteye's superb sidekick. Who is Lemillion?" Fuyumi-sensei reads the article's title for them.

"Lemillion only went pro in December, but he's already on the hero billboard. He won UA's Sports Festival two years in a row."

Eri is mesmerized as they watch him slip into a wrecked building and bring out two civilians with ease. Can she find the green boy too? Using this computer?

Kacchan soon arrives to pick her up, so it's a question left for tomorrow. His face goes weird when she asks if they have a computer. She decides she'll explore a little more with Suzuki-chan before letting him know why.

She learns more and more about heroes, and hero schools, and heroism as a job. The breakthrough surrounding green boy comes on

their third day of research. Suzuki is explaining to her how UA and Shiketsu and Ketsubutsu and Senshi West work as hero schools, when they come across an announcement for the UA sports festival. She can only understand the kana for *invite* and the date of April twenty-fourth. From there, a few more pictures down, green boy appears.

“Him!” she says, tapping the screen.

“Pro—something Hero Deku makes… debut, cuts short attempted te—I don’t know that word, attack with mini… damage,” Suzuki tries her best to read out loud. “UA student it says here. He’ll be at the sports festival, I know it.”

Days slip by, along with them the first week of school. It’s going better than she expected, truly. Suzuki is passionate but shy enough she won’t overwhelm Eri, and her other classmates are alright too, even if devil girl and crybaby girl in front of them are sure to have some type of incident daily.

On Sunday, she finds herself missing school. She pets Satsu. “Should I ask Kacchan?”

Satsu meows.

“We have a TV. I wanna see Deku-san on TV.”

Satsu meows again, disinterested.

“There’s no reason for him to say no. Heroes are cool. I bet Kacchan loves them too.”

Satsu does not seem to give a shit.

“Okay. I’ll ask him at dinner.”

She’s nervous and she’s not sure why. She feels as though she’s made a mistake, obscuring the details of her new interest in heroes from Kacchan. He’s seemed jittery, and granny hasn’t been getting better. She didn’t want to annoy him. Today he’s in a decent mood though.

“Kacchan?”

“Yeah,” he says through a mouthful of soba. They made yakisoba today. The spicy kind Kacchan loves. They’re eating at the kitchen table because it’s less distance to travel from the stove. “What’s up?”

“Do we have a TV?”

He looks at her as though she’s grown a second head. “Obviously. It’s in the living room. You’ve seen it. Ain’t never on though I guess.”

“At school, we’re learning about heroes.”

He chokes and downs an entire cup of water in one go to wash the food down. “Are ya?”

“Like All Might, and Kamui Woods. And Mt.Lady.”

“That’s… great.” He doesn’t sound like he thinks so. In fact, his eyes are glued to the door behind Eri like he’s two seconds away from jumping outside and sleeping in a bush for the night.

“I think heroes are really cool. And Suzu-chan, my friend, told me about… hero schools.”

“Ah fuck,” says Kacchan, running a shaking hand down his face. Eri isn’t sure she should keep going. “Yeah. Hero schools. Yeah. Mhm.” Is he talking to her or himself or an imaginary friend it’s anyone’s guess. “Spit out what you wanna say brat. C’mon.”

She squints, heart beating fast. “I want to watch the UA Sports Festival.”

His chair makes a shrieking noise as he pushes it back to stand up. Eri flinches. The only thing he says is, “I can’t do that.” Before he walks into the hall and slams the kitchen door shut so hard the calendar on the wall next to it rattles and tilts.

“Kacchan?” she asks the silence. Tears well at the bottom of her eyes and something in her heart burns. What did she do wrong? Is Kacchan mad? Why would he be mad at hero schools? She’d *known* this would happen. She wouldn’t have been nervous otherwise. She had a feeling and she did it anyway. How could she be so stupid?!

Wiping her cheeks with the nearest handkerchief she can find, she feels a little like the crybaby girl who sits in front of her in class. Will Kacchan send her away? What if she’s ruined her stay with Kacchan forever?

She has to apologize.

Katsuki locks the bathroom door behind himself and retches into the

toilet for a good two minutes. He wipes his dry mouth when he's done and lays on the cool tiled floor he knows he cleaned in the morning to get the room to stop spinning. What the *fuck* sort of reaction is that? Who gives a rat's ass about the UA Sports Festival? Why the fuck *does* he give a rat's ass about the UA Sports Festival? He can't be this pathetic, storming out of the room like some character off those TV soap operas with the desperate housewives screaming at anything that moves.

He stares at the foot of the sink and attempts to fix his breathing. Really he should have asked for a break the second the kid mentioned heroes and he could feel the panic monster coming.

Katsuki's been so fucking relieved, that school is working out for the brat a million miles better than he ever expected. It's been going so well in fact he's paranoid someone will pop out of somewhere and tell him it's all a smoke show or a trick.

Moving on. Moving on. Moving on to *fucking bullshit.*

First, healer hag spawns a terminal illness, second blue niece is on his ass about *existing,* third he keeps feeling like someone is following him damn near every time he leaves the house, fourth, fuck Le Chateliers principle, fifth how many goddamn Todorokis are out there?! How many kids did Endeavor pull out of his ass?! Why the fuck do they multiply?! Why the fuck does Katsuki keep running into them?! And now UA comes back to greet him like an overexcited extended family member he barely knows who leaves slobbery kisses and goes: "Look how big he is! Does he remember me?"

Okay. It's fine. This is fine. He's overreacting. It's only the Sports Festival. He's not sure what his problem with it even is anyway. Is he mad because the doctor said UA chaining him up was how he got noticed and ended up in that basement? UA wasn't wrong for that though. Or were they? At the end of the day that was only a situation where he exposed himself. Something similar would have ended up happening away at. Because it was him who sucked. Not UA. UA gave up on him, but can you blame them when he's not worth keeping? Koharu said that means they suck since they're supposed to help students instead of feeding them to the wolves when two slap on the wrist scoldings don't work. Katsuki is the only guy who got fed to the wolves though. So figures *he* must be the problem. Right? No?

He taps his head against the tile floor repeatedly, by now used to his glasses enough he can throw them around and keep them on as he

gives himself minor brain damage without being worried that they'll crack. He lays back down and there is the toilet. Staring at him. *Holy fuck* this is… *not* a new low. He's not dead for one. Things could be worse.

Moving on he said. That doesn't mean erasing any trace of heroism from his life (impossible) and locking away all his memories in the form of piranhas who will bite your fingers off when poked at. What's he planning on doing, becoming some embarrassing "no heroes in this household" grouch? Katsuki McScrooge? Moving on is about *processing what happened and coming to terms with it in a healthy way*, according to his bullshit live love laugh self-help book. So a "no hero talk" policy would not be helping anyone.

More importantly, he just stormed out on *a six-year-old*. Rule one of not being a horrible parent— ahem— brother, is *not* to lose your shit with your kid. It's safe to say he lost his shit. He's a dumb fucker. He's going to turn into his mom. Or back into his old self. Fucking fuck. He's supposed to be the adult in this household (and isn't that fucking terrifying).

He stands up and fixes his hair and straightens his clothes and flushes the toilet. It's fine. This is fine. They'll watch the UA Sports Fesival. They'll watch the *shit* out of it.

He opens the bathroom door and finds Eri right outside crying her fucking eyes out holy hell he sucks.

"Kacchan—"

"Brat—"

"We don't have to watch the festival." She hiccups. "Please don't be mad! I didn't mean to make you mad—"

"No. Shut up. I'm fucking sorry. I acted like a five-year-old. We're gonna watch it."

She sucks up her snot, baffled by the answer. "We are?"

"That's fucking right. We're going to watch it fifty times in a row if that's what you want." Because fuck UA, and fuck their rat principle, and fuck Aizawa, and fuck Katsuki. He's not so useless he can't even watch a circus freak show of child soldiers. That's right. UA can suck him. He paces back and forth.

“Are you…okay, Kacchan?”

“So okay. You don’t even know. It doesn’t get more okay than this. They should give me an award— that’s how okay I am. Don’t I look like the most okay person ever?”

“No.”

“Why do you gotta attack me like that brat?!”

“You’re acting—“ She’s laughing but her eyes are also very red. “— really weird, Kacchan.”

Then he starts laughing too. “Am I? You don’t know do you?”

“Know what?” That he got booted from UA. He’s sure he remembers memory machine mentioned him having a brief hero school stint at the library’s cafe, and Aoi has mentioned him getting abandoned more than a few times. She’s been there for all of that. If she’s been researching, it’s a miracle she’s come across nothing about Katsuki. He should really get around to checking the report memory machine compiled for him. He’s been so busy it’s been sitting there for weeks.

“Do you listen to what healer hag’s niece or my friend at the library say?”

“No. They’re weird.”

“So you just don’t listen.”

“Yeah. That’s what I used to do with Chisaki’s helpers.”

Why is this kid even more fucked up than him?!

“Works I guess.”

“Works for what?”

“Nothing, kid.”

“Kacchan…”

“I have a hero allergy.”

“Alle— what?”

He pats her head. “I’ll tell you when you’re older.”

“Kacchan—!”

“Tell you what, let’s make candy apples as an apology for before. Sorry I made you nervous about asking for shit, kid.”

“Candy… apple?”

He grins impishly.

“You’re gonna love it.”

He talked big last week, but now that he’s sitting in front of their somewhat ancient widescreen box TV with a bowl of popcorn in his left hand and the MusutafuTV broadcast of the UA Sports Festival open he’s feeling queasy. Satsu sits between him and Eri, more to partake in couch cuddles than watch the event. Eri is as good as vibrating with excitement beside him. She’s so happy he’s seriously questioning how he ever thought to prevent her from watching this shit.

The familiar theme song begins to play because UA is corny like that. He knows it by heart, but he’s not about to expose himself. Kids under fourteen aren’t allowed in the festival’s stadium without adult supervision, and of course, his parents didn’t give two shits about helping him attend growing up, so he’d always been constrained to watching on TV. He’s been in this exact same position for as long as he can remember. Only last year, he didn’t watch. And that’s because he was in it.

The brat is amazed by the opening ceremony, a similar light and performance show to the opener of the Olympics. He fights his churning stomach with popcorn. It can’t be *that* bad. Katsuki fucked over his schedule to take his meds right before this too, so the floatiness helps. Worst comes to worst, he’ll pull the plug on himself until the event is over.

The UA Sports Festival spans two weeks. Saturday of the first week is the second years. Saturday and Sunday of the second week are the first and third years. Because the fresh faces and the ones who’ll be pros in a few months are much more interesting than the inbetweeners, UA uses said inbetweeners like the opening filler episode of an anime. A little teaser for what’s to come. UA needs to make the money to throw at the companies that manufacture big-ass robots somehow, so the teenager trials of potential death are a perfect source of income. Katsuki knows that clip of him losing his shit on the

podium has like fifty million views on YouTube. People started memeing it. Once upon a time, he used to be angry at them. Now he thinks the clip is kind of disgusting. He's gotta remind himself to put some sort of block on it if he ever gives the kid access to a PC.

"Welcome to the UA Sports Festival, our annual incubator for watching hero fledglings hatch!" Cockatoo-sensei is as annoying as ever. "You're all excited, I presume, to watch how the infamous class 1-A has developed into class 2-A, and how their rivals will fare against them this year—" He drones on and on. "—now, I invite this year's second-year representative to take the stand. Iida Tenya."

It's been a while since Katsuki's seen four eyes. His exaggerated hand poses and way overthought speech are nostalgic. Four eyes hates him, in all likelihood. Or pities him. Or doesn't think about Katsuki at all. It's been two months shy of a year since the end of the first term. He tends to forget that.

"And now, we'll commence our first trial of the second-year games." Dramatic music plays as they get a close-up shot of the arena splitting apart. A giant glass structure made up of hundreds of box-like rooms sprawls the entire ground, reaching up to several floors and hanging on a metallic suspension system. "This one's called… Spy Session. A mirrored obstacle course. The inside is outfitted with cameras at every angle, while the specialized glass walls only work from the outside in. We can see our contestants, but they can't see us," explains microphone. "Eraser Head, take it from here?"

Katsuki feels a sort of restlessness build within him. He reaches out to pet Satsu with his free hand, and the cat nuzzles further into his leg. Sensei sounds as tired as ever. "The goal is for contestants to get themselves a white flag from the top of the structure. The number of flags is limited. Anyone who can't get there fast enough is cut from the next round." It might be kind of pathetic, but all he can hear is the *go home* from back then playing in a loop inside his head.

"Kacchan, look!" He snaps out of it to find Eri pointing at Deku, of all people. It's much easier to watch him from a screen than to meet him in real life. He looks taller, and he's gotten even buffer. "That's Deku!"

"How the fuck do you know Deku?"

"He hugged me once. When I tried to escape from Chisaki the first time."

Kirishima *did* say Deku was interning with All Might's former sidekick Nighteye, and that while patrolling under him they'd found out about Eri. He assumed it was some sort of a covert discovery or a stakeout mission. Not direct contact. He's surprised Deku of all people let Eri go after seeing the way Chisaki acted with her.

"I had to go back because Chisaki did the glove thing he does before he kills people… but his hands were so warm. He wouldn't let me go." Yup. That's more like Deku. "He's so cool." Whatever floats her boat. "He beats the villain like *foom*, and *wham*, and *kapow*. Then he ties them up with his lighting—"

"His what?"

TV Deku answers Katsuki's question for him when he somehow produces tendrils of black energy to use as whips. Within ten minutes of the race having started Katsuki has gathered that aside from this lightning, Deku can also fly and shit out smoke. Sure. Why the fuck not. Deku can turn into a Kaijuu and Katsuki wouldn't bat an eye. Though, how the hell does Deku even explain this type of shit within the confines of his quirk definition? Super strength and black lighting aren't the most related things in the world, never mind the smoke on top of that.

It makes him realize something else he hadn't when he was less cynical too, watching like this. This Sports Festival is dangerous as hell for the participants. Not in regards to the games themselves but in regards to the huge amount of information it offers about the players. The point is for heroes and the public to watch this and critique or be amazed respectively, but there ain't shit stopping villains from watching too. Already Katsuki has noticed three new tools in Deku's skill set and how hard he favors his right. A more careful villain could sit here and pick every detail apart. For heroes who are vastly advantaged by the element of surprise, participating comes with a huge risk.

Not that the competition itself isn't dangerous, because oh, it is. This year's twist for the obstacle course has the glass maze start rotating mid-challenge and the glass is brittle enough to break with mild force, mimicking wreckage in unstable debris. You could die with ease in a place like this. Katsuki recalls the obstacle course from their own year. He flew over the robot, while IcyHot froze the whole thing over and *let it fall on everyone else*. And UA let that fly. They *loved* that shit. They still love that shit it seems. Maybe healer hag is right. Maybe it is easier to go off the hinges when the environment is letting you get

away with it — and even helping unscrew your hinge for you— on the regular. Pet Satsu. One. Two. Three pets. The furball is asleep on his lap. Katsuki needs to stop thinking and be like Satsu. As long as the brat likes this shit he'll pull through.

Only twenty people make it through to the second round, among which are both Kirishima and Deku. His mind buzzes out for this round. He looks at the crowded arena, tries to remember what being up there felt like, and it's so easy to understand that he'll never be able to do it again. Not only a matter of reputation and public perception but rather one of his own ability. The thought of some fifty thousand people heaving their eyes on him is skin curling. Doesn't help that the last memory he has of that arena is being lowered down in chains. Weirdest part of the whole muzzle spiel was definitely the aftermath. Because he sat there waiting (loudly) for someone to unlock his restraints for something of a half hour, and afterwards everyone acted like chaining a student up like that was a regular thing that *happened* and the red lines etched into his face were not metallic muzzle marks. He still has no idea if muzzling winners who misbehave is UA's policy or if he was the exception. He's got enough a brain to know the ratings *loved* it though.

He comes back online for the tournament section of the event. The tournament is a yearly thing regardless of how the other games change. Different this time is that only eight contestants will qualify, instead of sixteen as in the other years.

Deku is fucking strong, and he powers through his brief bracket to end up fighting Todoroki in the finals.

"That two-tone piece of shit is your sensei's brother," Katsuki explains. "Yes, hit that bitch—!" He's rooting for Deku, because Todorokis make up a good quarter of Katsuki's ninety-nine problems.

"You're so mean Kacchan."

"What, you're rootin' for Deku too ain't ya?"

"Yes—"

"So be passionate about it."

They spend the whole match cheering on Deku and swearing colorfully at every closeup of IcyHot. Deku wins, barely, then Ponytail goes on to win third place over Kirishima.

Commercial break and awards ceremony and it's over. Katsuki's ass is sore from the long-term sitting. It really hasn't been that bad. The meds help and for all the things he misses (the thrill of controlled battle and first and foremost, explosion), for all the things he regrets, there are things he's relieved to be missing out on (the crowds, and the fanfare, and the nationwide exposure of everything to everyone). Katsuki could live like this, as a spectator instead of the main participant. He might need to thank the kid because this helped him come to terms with his UA problem a lot more than anything else has in a while.

He's returning from the kitchen with two glasses of water, expecting to see the medal ceremony underway, when he finds an emergency flash news broadcast. "Destruction at Deika. Entire town transformed into ghost dwelling." The drone footage shows a city utterly wrecked, buildings dusted and apartment blocks leveled. Eri stares wide-eyed.

"—unclear, believed to be a conflict between followers of the Meta Liberation Movement and the League of Villains." His cup slips a little. He sinks into the couch and tries to switch to another program. *Every* channel is showing variations of reports on Deika City. Every single one says League of Villains. That is going to get *ignored*. Fuck no. Not today.

"What's going on, Kacchan?"

"Nothing."

There's enough on his plate as is. He switches back to MusutafuTV to catch the start of this very normal medal ceremony with no screaming people tied to concrete blocks to be found anywhere.

He may never be able to truly escape, but he'll be damned if he doesn't have his peace for as long as possible.

Chapter End Notes

check out this bomb ass fanart of chapter 17 i never got the chance to link it to a new chapter release click here

1) crack, angst?
2) the person who comes back here is fuyumi actually, though i suppose izuku and aizawa and the love do make brief cameos
3) tbh i think this is kind of a breather chapter. I've been meaning to write 1) fuyumi being eri's teacher and 2) katsuki and eri watching the sports festival together since forever. the sports

festival will keep being important later too
4) i rewrote the first part of this chapter like half a dozen times and did a decent bit of research on day cares and first grade in japan. the rock paper scissors for leftover food is a thing that happens a lot and i thought it would be perfect to have eri with no idea what rock paper scissors eve is competing for an apple.
5) piano is also a requirement for Japanese kindergarten teachers apparently and i thought again, good opportunity for fluff
6) loved all the reactions to aoi from last chapter. some of you were spot on some of you were hilarious my medal goes to "she can take her lil rant and stick it up her ass" i cackled like you wouldn't believe. i hope she'll end up making more sense once we get more context to why she's doing that kind of shit
7) for a while I've been wanting to have a scene where katsuki kind of loses it thanks to something eri says because so far it's been pretty smooth sailing with him as a parent yk what i mean? he's chiller in this fic so i went for a milder freakout towards her specifically. wanted to avoid the melodrama too which to be honest i don't think i did that well
8) while doing research i ended up stumbling on these sucky correctional facilities and boarding schools for "problematic" kids where they use what's known as attack therapy (basically verbally abusing, humiliating, and denouncing the patient) to break their sense of self and "fix" them. safe to say it's problematic and apparently about 9% of ppl who'd go through it had lasting psychological damage. it's worse when patients aren't allowed to leave during the attack therapy. guess it kind of reminded me of what I've done to katsuki here, except I've dialed it up by about 100 notches. you can look it up on Wikipedia. parents will even pay to have their kid kidnapped in the middle of the night and sent to these boarding schools. i was honestly shocked to find out it's a thing that's still happening
9) a lot of the comments on last chapter were phrased as if we're nearing the end of the fic, and i realized that was because of the misleading ass chapter count. yeah, this fic spiraled out of control and 30 chapters are not going to be enough to get it finished. there's like three interlude chapters after this ard is done (two more chapters after this) then two OTHER arcs following that which happen after the timeskip. trust me, we've got a long long way to go still. hope you'll hang in there ^^
10) super grateful for 2500 kudos and almost 60k hits you guys are amazing. I'm still so sorry for never finding time to reply to all the comments, but they're seriously my favorite type of interaction and I'm grateful for every single one. you're all so

funny n smart and encouraging
11) fuyumi was damn hard to write ngl

Chapter 26: Rainstorm

Chapter Summary

hehe ?

tw: death

Chapter Notes

nervous laughter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It’s good to hear,” Koharu says, her voice filtered through the oxygen mask.

“What is?”

“That the school ended up working out.”

Katsuki’s happy he gets to be here at all. He visits daily but it’s been a week since their last talk. Healer Hag’s condition took such a nosedive she couldn’t stay conscious for more than an hour a day and had to be intubated. For a good few moments, he thought he’d show up the next day to find her ready to be turned to ashes.

“Her teacher hasn’t recognized me either.”

Healer hag winces. Even a movement that small seems to make her whole body tremor. Katsuki is unused to the slow pace of her voice; as if she has trouble stringing thoughts together. Minor stroke. That’s what blue niece’s dad told Katsuki. Mostly affected her mobility. It will be a miracle if she ever walks again. “Sorry about that.”

“Eh.” He shrugs. “She’s any other person as long as she’s got no idea who I am.”

“And at home? It’s not too much to deal with?”

“I fuck up,” he admits.

She might be trying to arch a brow but Katsuki can’t really tell. Never mind that her eyebrows are so thin they blend with her papery skin. “All the time?”

“No. Half.”

“Katsuki.”

“Fine. A sixteenth of the time.”

“You exaggerate.”

“I used to lose my shit *all* the time… before. I have some sort of anger issue. Not exactly mom material. When she asked about the Sports Festival—”

“It’s been… almost a month—“

“Still.”

A beat of silence.

“I could talk to Aoi, about anger management therapy.”

“She doesn’t like me.”

Koharu’s mask shifts. Katsuki assumes she’s frowning. “You think so? I don’t think so.”

“I know so.”

“She’s a sweet girl. Helped me out a lot with you two even though we hadn’t seen each other in years.”

“Different around me then. I don’t fucking know.”

“What about the shop? You’re okay on your own?”

“I keep it open a couple of hours a day on weekdays. That’s all I got time for considering school and the kid.”

“You haven’t been using your quirk powers?”

Katsuki rolls his eyes at her suspicious tone. “No, *grandma*. I tell anyone who shows up looking for it to fuck off too.”

“Good.”

She blinks her eyes closed and lets herself sink into the bed. “Clean up the second floor— when you find the time. I have a lot of notes and journals and useful old supplies up there.”

That sounds like a colossal pain in the ass. The few times he's been up there he's risked getting some sort of dust transmitted ages extinct disease. The dust mites are big enough to rival a fucking rabbit, or Satsu when he was a little baby.

"And my room. Have you gone into my room?"

"No."

"Never?"

"Never." He thought about it on and off— going in there to clean more than anything. Katsuki knows from experience leaving a room unattended that long with furniture uncovered is kicking yourself in the dick when it comes to cleaning. A room in a house with zero divide from the outdoors even more so. But he hasn't been able to bring himself to do it. He's never been allowed in that room. Going inside now would be admitting defeat.

"I've got a lot more journals in there. And financial records, logbooks, a diary of all the favors people owe me, and a list of useful phone numbers and contacts."

Now that he thinks about it. "How the hell do you pay taxes?" All their transactions are done in cash, they never deposit that shit anywhere, they don't give out receipts and they don't even have a cash register.

"I don't."

"No. *Fuck no*. You're a tax evader?! What the fuck healer hag?!"

"Shh. Boy. Keep your voice down. I'm not a tax evader," she says. "Most of the time—"

Katsuki groans.

"The logistics are abhorrent. The shop moves. No one knows where it is and this island, while in Japanese waters, belongs to no countries —"

"That's not how it works—"

"— because I had a contact of mine erase it from records when I first bought it—"

"Bullshit—"

“No one knows where it is so no one knows where the taxes are supposed to go. No one knows who I am as she shopkeeper. I did declare a good majority of the money I’d make as research earnings under Iki Koharu and that got taxed accordingly but it isn’t like I *have* to.”

Fucking fuck. That raises even more problems. “Water? Electricity bill? You got none of that?” He’s been so caught up in all his other stress that he hasn’t realized he’s not been paying a dime for that stuff in months.

“The island is self-sufficient. Water all around— a filtration system has been in place for decades. I replaced it some five years ago, Plenty of turbine power too.”

“Fuck me. I even work with no permit—“

“You’ll be alright.”

“Yeah? What if I fucking murder someone by giving them bad treatment? Who’s going to take responsibility for that? Shit. How haven’t I been thinking about this crap?!”

“It’s a clandestine clinic. People accept a certain amount of danger when coming to see you. Tell me, you give advice to people when it’s something you haven’t studied?”

“…no.”

“There you go. My notes are so comprehensive even a child could become a stellar pharmacist by memorizing them.” A rare nugget of personal pride. It’s a side of Koharu Katsuki doesn’t get to see a lot.

“It’s still weird as hell. And illegal.” He kicks lightly at the tiled floors of the room. Koharu coughs. The heart rate machine next to her beeps. Her face is so sunken in it makes her look ghoulish. “When will you get better, anyway?”

It’s a moot question. He knows it’s a moot question. Mechanical beeps are his answer.

“…Soon.”

“Don’t lie.”

“I *hope* it will be soon.”

He rubs the scar on his left wrist, unable to look at her. “Can’t we like… have the kid rewind you?”

“No.”

“Why not?! She rewound me just fine and I had a hole the size of a plate in me!”

“That was different.”

“How?! You’re dying. I was dead. You do the math.”

“My condition.” She coughs. “Isn’t something you can rewind with a two or three-hour flashback. I’ve had it for *years*. The first traces of it began to appear when I was younger than you. For me to be rid of it entirely, Eri-chan would have to rewind me back into a child.”

“What about a year?”

“It was bad then too. Not this bad, but bad. And it could end up developing into something even worse. There’s no telling the progression of the disease would follow the exact same pattern. She could rewind me and I could still die a week later.” He flinches. “This is far from the first time my health has gotten worse. It used to happen every other year before I met you.”

“But not this bad!”

“Once or twice yes, this bad. It’s lifelong, Katsuki.”

“Your lungs then. She can do your lungs. Fix them.”

Koharu struggles to shake her head. “You know she doesn’t have the control for that. She’s a kid. We can’t put pressure on her to constantly heal me. Say she messes up, and it’s natural that she will once in a while at that age. She’ll blame herself forever.”

“You’re right but…” He digs his foot into the floor and whispers, “You’re just going to roll over and die?”

“I’m not going to die.”

“I told you not to lie, earlier.”

The door slides open, and in walks a nurse Katsuki doesn’t recognize. He adjusts the face mask he has to wear every time he visits and offers the woman a nod.

“If you’ll please wait outside. I need to change Iki-san’s IV serum.”

Katsuki follows her instructions on ginger legs, stepping into the hall to find Aoi and Eri sitting on opposite ends of the waiting area. He expects blue niece to start spouting some shit about him not stressing healer hag out, but she seems lost in her own little world as she’s been lost for the last week. Her eyes flit to him momentarily, pause for a second, flit away, and that’s as far as the interaction goes.

The brat meanwhile is cross-legged on the chair, and motions for Katsuki to come closer. “How is granny?”

Katsuki grimaces. “She’s… alive.”

“Why did you leave?”

“Nurse needed to change some shit.”

“Oh.”

They wait. And wait. He’d like to say they wait an hour because that’s what it feels like, but it’s closer to ten minutes in reality. The nurse steps outside and says: “She’s asking to see ‘Eri-chan’.”

“Me?” The kid points to herself.

“Whoever it is, please make it quick. She has a chest X-ray scheduled at two.”

Katsuki stands up along with Eri and makes to follow her back inside, but the nurse steps in front of the door and tells them: “Only the girl, she said.”

Eri looks back at Katsuki with confusion in her eyes. He shrugs —what else is there to do— and pushes her forward with a gentle hand. The nurse opens the door for her and closes it right back as the brat disappears inside. Now it’s him and these two ladies in this hallway. One who kind of maybe hates him and one he met *today*. Lovely.

Eri doesn’t like this room. It reminds her of some of the rooms Chisaki would put her in; doused in cool, artificial light and crowded with big-screened machines she can’t explain the uses of. She almost trips on the wire of the machine that checks heartbeat. There are so many of them gathered by the bedside all the plugs on that side of the wall aren’t enough to power them. She knows granny is supposed to be on

the bed, but from the line of sight at her height, she's little more than a bump under white blankets.

"Eri-chan, are you there?" She sounds like the voice Fuyumi-sensei uses to imitate the hundred-year-old grandmas in fairy tales if Fuyumi-sensei had a cold. Eri walks around the bed to sit on the bedside chair where granny can see her. Her drawings are peeling off the wall, and she's a lot better now, they are no good.

"Granny, I'll get you new drawings so you won't be bored. I'm sorry, these are so ugly—"

"Forget that, honey."

It's hard to look at her. Eri hates that oxygen mask and the filtered quality of her voice. One of her hands is above the blankets, and it's bony and flabby at the same time; as if her skin to too heavy to sit where it's supposed to be sitting.

"Listen to me." For all the fatigue on her face, granny's eyes are gold as ever, bright, alert, intelligent. "Are you happy?"

"What?"

"With Katsuki. He takes care of you well?"

People keep asking her this. "I wish he would let me have more than one candy apple a week. Whatever ca— cavities are my teeth will beat them up—"

Granny might be laughing or scoffing or Eri's not sure what she's doing, because these stuttered wheezy breaths come out of her in staccato. She coughs once or twice before clearing her throat. "You like Katsuki?"

"I love him." More than she does candy apples, probably.

"You want to keep living with him?"

"Yes."

"Even if it's only the two of you?" Eri frowns.

"What about Satsu?"

"And Satsu too."

“What about you?”

No answer.

“Taking care of you does Katsuki good too.”

Eri recalls how stressed he seemed weeks prior when she asked to watch the sports festival — how, sometimes, he’ll get so stressed he hides in his futon until he falls asleep.

“Is Kacchan sick too?”

“Differently from me.”

“How then?”

“His… heart is sick. Bad people did bad things to him.”

“Like Chisaki?”

“Like Chisaki.” Granny takes a great deep breath. “It’s unfair, but you two are in similar boats. Now you’re siblings by law, as well. You’ll need to be there for each other.”

“How do I be there for Kacchan?” Does it mean being a hero? Like Deku? Like Kacchan is to her? Can she be Kacchan’s hero? “What does it mean?”

“Look out for him.” She blinks hard. “You’re too small for me to burden you with this… but look out for him.”

Eri reaches over the bed’s metal guardrail to clasp granny’s cold hand. She twists their pinkies together and granny strains to keep her forearm lifted.

“I promise,” Eri says. She’ll be Kacchan’s hero, someday. She likes the sound of it.

“You’re a good girl. Stick together, and do everything you ever want, and grow up happy—”

Eri nods along, but she isn’t sure why granny has started to recite the affirmations from the poster in Kanagawa-sensei’s meditation classroom.

“—I wish we could’ve gotten to know each other more.”

“Are you gonna die, granny?” The older woman’s grip tightens for a moment. Eri can see how she’s straining to breathe even with the oxygen mask on.

“You’ve grown up too fast for your own good.”

The door slides open and the pretty lady in the hospital scrubs from earlier says some things about radiation and two pm and late. Eri gathers her time is up and squeezes granny’s finger before letting go and standing back on the seat. “Bye-bye,” she says. “Me and Kacchan will come back tomorrow. I’ll bring you new drawings. I’m much better at them.”

At the corners, granny’s eyes crinkle the way they do when she smiles. “I’ll be looking forward to seeing them.”

“—abnormal early rainy season. Due to irregular winds from the south blowing in humid clouds, the majority of Japan, Kyoto included, is expected to see heavy rains these upcoming few weeks. Riverside and below water level areas to prepare for flooding—

They blow past the radio in the reception area when Katsuki’s phone rings. He’s got Aoi marked as Blue Bitch. “You might want to—“

“We’re two hallways away,” he says and hangs up. They’re a little late because Eri insisted on packing an entire folder of drawings to hang up for “granny”. Their section of the ICU is empty as always, and the hallway looks exceptionally dreary, low-lit no thanks to the cloudy sky outside. Blue niece is leaning on the wall, wearing the same clothes she was wearing yesterday, and Katsuki is not liking the number of nurses entering and exiting healer hag’s room.

His steps stutter at the mouth of the hall, and his mouth falls open but he can’t get words out. His fingers are cold. Blue niece looks at him with eyes shot red and a splotchy face. His fingers are so cold.

He knows. He fucking *knows*. He doesn’t want to know.

“Kacchan?” Eri’s tug on his jacket is ignored in favor of walking closer.

“What—“

“She died,” blue niece says. “She died, okay.”

For a split second her form melts. For a split second Katsuki is blind and dizzy; barely capable of breathing in a room submerged in air the consistency of sludge. “What the fuck do you mean?”

“She died. She’s been dead for two hours. That’s what I mean.”

His limbs seem to move on their own, brushing past the kid and reaching out for blue’s collared shirt, tightening his fists into it. “We were here yesterday! We talked to her yesterday! Is this your idea of a practical joke?! Because I ain’t laughing.”

“Do I look like I’m laughing?” She hiccups. Those are definitely tear tracks catching the faint light. Katsuki doesn’t want to do this. He wants to go home. Where even is home?

“How?” he whispers.

“They tried a lung transplant. It didn’t work out.”

His grip goes slack in shock. “Out of nowhere?!”

“We’d been— discussing it for a while. Her condition deteriorated badly overnight… last-ditch effort.”

“If it was a possibility, why didn’t you do it sooner?!”

“Our family’s blood isn’t exactly normal,” she snaps. “We have a history of rejections. It was too risky.

He swallows bile— can’t stomach any of it. “None of you even thought to tell me? I know I don’t mean shit to you bitches, but I’ve been coming here every damn day. You’d think it’s clear I give a fuck and want to know when a person I care about is getting a whole ass transplant because they’re about to… about to—“

“…Kacchan?” cuts in Eri’s wobbly voice.

Right. Keep his cool. He’s supposed to be the responsible one. He lets go of blue niece’s collar harshly and walks a few steps to sink into one of the chairs and sigh. “Why the fuck wouldn’t you call me?” His sentence cracks midway. Rapid blinking doesn’t do shit. “Two fucking hours—” He scoffs wetly. “You’re not right in the head—”

“I’m sorry.” It’s not at all expected and she sounds genuinely apologetic too. “I’m sorry, kid.”

It feels like she’s apologizing for more than not calling— for so much

more than he knows how to put into words.

“Can I… can I see her?”

“They already took her to the funeral house to prep for the ceremony.”

He kicks the tiles. “Of course you did,” he mutters. “Bullshit—“

“She set up all of this herself, you know. She didn’t want to inconvenience you. ‘Cuz you’re a kid. She looked out for you until the very end.”

“Shut up.“

Her phone buzzes. She takes it out of her pocket and scrolls through. “They need me on the west wing. I’ll text you the details for funeral proceedings, Katsuki-kun.”

He says nothing.

Her steps reverberate in the melted amphitheater of Katsuki’s mind, like an actor stepping off the stage of a bad tragedy.

“What about my drawings, Kacchan?” The brat holds out the thick plastic folder, but Katsuki’s eyes can only focus on the sanitation workers cleaning the room behind her and the dozens of older drawings piled into their blue trash cans. A fresh wave of tears prickles at his eyes.

“You’re gonna be the death of me, kid.”

Katsuki hates funerals. As a brat, he could never understand what the point of crying over a corpse was. It wouldn’t bring anyone back. It wouldn’t magically revive people. It would just make anyone left alive look weak and pathetic. When his gramps died, the biological one, Katsuki was four, and he apparently almost threw a tantrum at the funeral. Gramps had been such a fiery person (everyone on his hag’s side was) and here they were covering him in flowers he used to hate and picking his bones out of big ashtrays and dressing like a wannabe band of office emos. Gramps would be embarrassed if he’d been there to see it.

He doesn’t remember the near tantrum, but he does remember the old man dragging him to the back rooms of the funeral home. Back when

he used to care more about Katsuki than his morning coffee and sketchbook. The old man flat out told him the funeral was never for gramps. It was for the rest of them. So they could feel better about themselves, knowing they said goodbye to gramps properly. Some people did it for religious reasons— they thought it helped souls move on to the afterlife easier. Katsuki's old family was never religious, or at least they hadn't been for a long time, but they followed the rituals for the sake of tradition.

Over a decade later, loitering in the back of this funeral temple in dark sweats, using the shade to hide like that one vintage hero batman, Katsuki still doesn't get it.

If you want to show up to the proceedings, do it discreetly. Some of my family is okay, a good deal of them are vultures. It's better if they don't meet you, much less see your face. Heaven knows what scams they'll try to pull.

Old money people love inheritances and trust funds. An estranged grand aunt with a lot of money and no one to leave it to is prime prey.

You know how Katsuki knows these people are *rich* rich? They own a private funeral home with a temple and everything just for their own exclusive little family. He didn't want to risk exposing Eri (who's taking Koharu's death a lot better than he expected) to what healer hag described as vultures, so he quickly dropped her off at Minami Early's Saturday daycare for a few hours until he's done here. He hates doing it— it reminds him so much of his own parents and being forgotten left at childcare facilities, but the kid is way too young to deal with the hassle of sneaking around the grounds of this fancy-ass big enough to be a castle property that is the Hiryo estate. Blue niece, who has become suspiciously agreeable, helped him set up a pocket entrance from the island to one of the never-used supply rooms of the main house (because there are *multiple*) and he snuck around from there.

Healer hag was right. The pocket entrances still work, as does everything charmed with her quirk. It makes more sense now, why healer hag passed out that one day he left home with her painting the front door. She'd also used her blood to make two dozen zip-up portals if Katsuki were to ever need them. Damn worrywart.

Okay.

No crying.

The main hall of the temple is saturated with auras, most of them some shade or consistency of suffocating gold. There are so many he can't see the picture of healer hag they've propped up on the grand, flower-adorned altar. Rows and rows of attendants. Katsuki only knows three of them, and he's been living with healer hag full time for a year.

I wanted my grave to be on the island, but Haruki is a stubborn mule. I can't say no to him when he's done me this many favors. Sorry for all this hassle, boy.

Kasuki hates being fake dead and a wanted victim-criminal. It makes everything twenty times more complicated than it needs to be. He couldn't even light a pinch of damn incense alongside the other mourners without having to come up with five new identities and lie fifty times in the process.

It goes on for *so* long. He blends in with the thinning crowd when they move the casket from the altar into the crematorium. Waits longer, hiding behind a tree. He doesn't need to be able to look in there to know blue niece and a bunch of other people he's never met will be passing the bones from chopstick to chopstick to urn. More time, more electricity in the air. It never ends. This whole ceremony will probably help all these people reconnect and share their healer hag memories, but Katsuki has nothing in common with any of them. He does not fit, so he's left to watch from the sidelines.

The main family filters out of the crematorium eventually, and Katsuki catches sight of the few workers hired to settle the grave situation (the family plot is on the property too, go figure. Katsuki is looking out for the coast to clear of passers-by so he can light some incense when his phone vibrates with a text.

[Blue Bitch] 16:23

Where are you?

[You] 16:23

Behind a tree.

[Blue Bitch] 16:23

Which one?

[Blue Bitch] 16:24

Nevermind.

[Blue Bitch] 16:24

Meet me by the back of the cremation hall.

So he walks over there. Blue niece is in a pitch-black kimono, and her face is puffed up. There's this urn with blue and gold motifs in her hands. She doesn't notice him until Katsuki has tapped her shoulder.

"God. Your no footsteps thing is so creepy." Even the leaves don't seem to crunch under his feet. He can't explain it. "We're driving to Uncle Ryu's family restaurant for the dinner, so the house should be easier to sneak around in."

Katsuki taps his stuffed pant pocket. "I took the gate with me."

"Even better. Leave it with me. I'll set it up somewhere safe for you when you want to visit." she says. "Take this too."

He holds his hands out for the urn, which is quite light really.

"I thought you had a family grave in here."

"We do, but grandpa thought part of the ashes should go to the island. You should have a shrine somewhere in that house. If you can't figure out a grave situation in time for thirty-five days bring them back here."

That's kind of nice. The fact that this little pot is all he has left of the actual healer hag is making his skin crawl but it's nice he doesn't have to come here all the time to pay traditional respects.

"Didn't they question shit, your other family members? Do they even know she was living with anyone?"

"Only rumors. Even I don't know where the island is supposed to be."

"You could have used GPS at any time while you were on it."

"Auntie wouldn't have wanted that."

Kasuki looks away from her face. "Nope."

A bright flash splits the murky sky apart and it's followed by one of

the loudest rumbles of thunder Katsuki has ever heard. The humidity of the air makes his nose tingle.

“Get going, c’mon. I can’t be late either.”

He steps through into the living room of the house that has become his home and watches the other side of the pocket entrance zip itself up and become crumpled. Resting the urn on the floor, he zips up his side of the entrance as well and throws it haphazardly into the closet. The only logical places for a shrine in this house are the second floor or Koharu’s room because those are the only two areas Katsuki hasn’t thoroughly explored.

He hates having to go inside healer hag’s room. Pushing open that rickety door, and powering through the rough patches of the sliding track— it feels wrong. He must be cursed if after all this even one of the few people who’s ever liked him ends up dead within the year.

It’s stale and dusty. Her study has very high ceilings, and windows for days. All the tables are low, the floor is scattered with boxes, books, baggies, and from the ceiling hang some three dozen bulbs. Katsuki presses the switches on the wall until he hits the one that works, and the filament bulbs light up to douse the room in warm white. A few of the lights are lower than the others, encased in larger glass baubles, and Katsuki quickly realizes by touching one (they don’t get hot at all) that these particular lights are on running tracks, and they can be moved around the room as needed. There’s a hunk of a computer too, taking up an entire desk in the corner. Wind rattles against the old glass windows. Looks like the weather followed him all the way here.

Katsuki finds the shrine in one of the wall-embedded closets. It’s definitely a family shrine meant for people, from the look of it, but the only picture on the little shelf is that of— he wipes the thick layer of dust off it— a dog. You can see a bit of who’s gotta be healer hag in the picture too, and she’s so much younger it’s kind of mindboggling. He puts the fallen picture of Woofie the ancient dog to the side and rests the urn in the correct spot. The drawer under this wall cubby offers him incense. His hands shake while he lights it.

He should get a good crying session over with.

“Something is attacking my window,” Eri says, swimming in her nightshirt and looking fidgety.

Katsuki’s stomach swoops, and he moves the pan he’s using to cook off

the stovetop so it doesn't burn while he deals with this little problem. What is it now? A kidnapper? A wild animal? They walk to the kid's room on their tiptoes, and Katsuki can't see anything. The rain is rattling hard against the glass (it's been some two hours since the storm started and it doesn't look to be ending any time soon) and the wind out is so strong there's a noticeable temperature change in rooms with windows and doors leading outside, but otherwise, he sees nothing.

"Where is it?"

The brat points to the window. Has she been seeing nightmares again? There's nothing fucking there.

Then a gust of wind so violent collides with the glass Katsuki brings his hands up to protect himself on instinct. It's followed by the crash of thunder. Eri flinches hard. "Th—there."

"It's a storm, kid." He winces after another hard shot of lightning. "Nothing's attacking your window."

That said, he remembers Koharu putting up storm shutters the few times they had storms last year (he wasn't here for last year's rainy season) and he doesn't trust the structural soundness of the little house without them.

"Wait here. Imma go beat the storm's ass."

He can't be bothered to find outdoor clothes to wear, so he steps outside in his pajamas. Immediately, he's wet to the bone. His glasses become useless. The storm shutters are in the outhouse. That's a good way into the yard. Ugh.

Katsuki fights the wind and mud to open the doors of the storage shed. The storm shutters are huge and heavy. He's going to have to carry them one by one. His increased surface area while hauling the massive sheets of wood and carbon fiber and metal is an utter bitch for wind resistance, and his lower legs are completely soaked in mud. He doesn't give a shit. Half an hour of battling the wind later and he's got the shutters where they need to be on all the windows and outside screens of the house.

He breathes such a big sigh of relief when he manages to get back inside it almost makes him forget the chill creeping into his bones. Almost. The temperature change and being wet don't mix well for avoiding sickness, and he's had it up to his nose with sickness lately.

“Gonna be in the bathroom for five minutes!” he yells out and hops in for a shower so hot it hurts. Drying his hair seems like a pain, so he opts to tie up a towel and leave it at that. He always has a spare of clothes in his bottom drawer.

Eri’s under her futon when he goes back to her room. Instead of the ruckus of the stormy night, her window is now a view of plain carbon fiber.

“You won,” she says.

“Fucking course I did.”

It hasn’t done much to muffle the noise though. The thunder continues to sound like someone is beating huge sheets of metal in their ears.

“But I’m still scared.”

Satsu has decided to plant himself in front of the shrine and will literally electrocute you with lighting if you try to move him, so leaving him with Eri isn’t an option either...

Katsuki is kind of messy and fast-paced when he cooks: lots of splattering oil, lots of high heat, lots of speedy movements with too sharp knives. It depends on the meal, but most of his favorites are dangerous for a little kid to make….

“Come cook with me.”

Fuck it. He has pre-made pie crust in the fridge. Today can be an exception.

He sets up a stool for her to stand on so she can reach the counter and hauls over an armful of apples plus a plastic peeler.

“Think you can peel a few of these?”

She nods slowly, and Katsuki lets her do that while he finishes with the gyoza he was frying before. They’re all but cold now since it took way too long to sort out the storm shutters, but it’s nothing a little heat won’t fix. By the time he’s plated those, Eri has only peeled one apple out of six.

“I’m bad at this,” she says, red in the ears.

“You’re a baby. Who gives a fuck.” A pout and a furiously peeled second apple dumped in the bowl. This brat is petty.

He finishes up with the other three apples by the time she's done with her third, and he tells her to watch (and keep her hands far far away from the countertop) while he cuts them up.

They add sugar and a few spices, then Katsuki instructs her to grab the lemon half he cut up in the morning and squeeze. She likes getting to mix up the apples and thoroughly coating them in cinnamon while Katsuki searches for that store-bought pie crust. It's not pie crust, as it turns out, it's sheets of filo dough he bought way back because healer hag likes—liked filo pastries. He swallows and grabs it anyway. It'll do. Making handmade dough right now would take way too long.

"Hey, press it down like this," he says, laying two sheets of the pastry on a buttered pan and pushing down on one of the sides. The kid follows his lead.

"Now throw that shit in there." He helps her by holding the bowl of apples on its side while she uses a spatula to get all the filling into the pan. Katsuki makes an egg wash to brush over the top of the side crust and the sheets they lay to cover the apples. No fancy latices or crust designs today, just a plain old disk with slits in it.

All the gyoza has long been eaten by the time the alarm rings for the pie. With all this oil and butter and sugar and dough they've been eating today they'll need to look into a week-long diet cleanse. But Katsuki doesn't care. He's only eating for the sake of it anyway.

They've got no patience for the pie to cool and cut two slices out steaming hot.

"What about Satsu?" Eri asks, frowning at the number of plates from the opposite end of the island.

"He's a cat."

"What about granny?"

"She's dead," Kasuki says flatly. *This kid.*

"But you said you put her in the shrine thingy."

"Yeah, her fucking *ashes*."

"Fuyumi-sensei told us dead people watch us from the sky." Is that why Eri's been doing well with Koharu's death? Are Todorokis actually good for something? "That's what sensei's other brother is

doing." Oooh boy. That is very much not what sensei's other brother is doing. The burn scars on Katsuki's upper arms would know. He nicks his finger with the knife by accident and curses. That blood is so neon it hurts his eyes. Better get that to stop bleeding before he leaks liquid dynamite on their food. The cold tap water prickles his skin, and he blots anything leftover with a spare paper towel. Who gives a crap about Todoroki Toyota or whatever the fuck his name was. Katsuki's okay. His sudden clumsiness is stress, and not of the Toyota-related kind. That dumpster fire of a family is none of this business.

Eri has barely noticed any of this happening and is continuing with her little speech. "And papa. And granny now." He's never been much for this afterlife thing, but if it helps the brat feel better about Koharu and the actual dad she technically killed, he's on board. He's reminded of the fact that hey, he's died a couple of times, and he's gotten glimpses of the nothing that is the afterlife. Or is that the quirk plane? Is the quirk plane the afterlife? Katsuki doubts Koharu's ashes have an aura… Not the time to think about it, and not a good thing to think about. He's never stayed on that side for long enough.

They leave healer hag a tiny slice of pie as an offering, in the end. Satsu snakes around their legs and watches them do it curiously.

"Can we eat on my futon?"

"You know I hate that shit." Sleeping with crumbs is nasty.

"Please?"

So here they are, eating apple pie in the brat's lamplight-lit cubby of a room while a storm rages outside. What are they supposed to do now? Is Katsuki supposed to keep the shop? Is he supposed to kick himself out? He hasn't been able to force himself to read the rest of healer hag's goodbye letter yet. What a pile of bullshit.

"I miss granny."

"I miss her too."

"Chisaki exploded a lot of my handlers in front of me but I never got this sad." That kind of thing always fucks him up to hear.

"Probably because they sucked ass to you," he attempts to reason.

"Can't I use my quirk to bring granny back?" His breath catches. He's thought about it, he won't lie. Her ashes are some two rooms away. A

rewind and they could become like the tree on the beach all those months ago— a rejuvenated person. But… it seems too much. If healer hag's ashes were split and the half they have here rewinds into one full live healer hag, what happens with the half back at the Hiryo estate? Could they clone healer hag by rewinding each of her remaining bones one by one? Does the kid's rewind affect the brain as well, possibly fucking up and erasing healer hag's memories? Does it even work on things that are one hundred percent dead if they exclude Katsuki as a ghost or whatever nature-bending bullcrap he is?

It isn't worth it. So many things could go wrong. He's never heard of a necromancy quirk ever. What if they do revive healer hag but she's incomplete and plagued by a hundred more new health issues?

A part of him is desperate enough, but she refused to have Eri heal her even when she was alive. Trying it now would be a huge betrayal of trust.

"No," he grits out, doing a poor job of convincing himself.

"Why not?"

"Cut it out, kid."

She closes her mouth and stares at her plate of half-eaten pie. When she looks back up at him her eyes are wet.

"But I miss her! You said I could be a hero with my quirk! Heroes save people!"

No hero thoughts. No angry thoughts. He exhales a shuddering breath. "It won't work," he says quietly.

"How do you know?"

"I don't."

A beat of silence. They both get up and speed walk back to Koharu's room. The urn is sealed. They're not supposed to do this. They're not supposed to break the seal at all. He's not *a hundred percent* sure if it's blasphemy but he's pretty positive it is.

Katsuki sets the urn on the ground between them. Eri's aura is pooling on the hardwood, and her horn is bigger than it's been in a while. She's got a good stockpile.

What's one more sin?

He unseals the urn —it makes a too loud popping noise in the relative silence— and sets both base and lid down gently. The opening is big enough for Eri's hand to fit without having to dump the ashes out.

"Do your worst I guess."

She tries everything. Scrunches up her face and lights up her horn and twists her aura so Katsuki knows she's trying to use her quirk. Thirty seconds, a minute, two, it doesn't work. Katsuki's nose itches. "I told you it wouldn't—"

He's interrupted by her sob. She shakes her hand, covers the urn, and pushes it away, crawling onto him hard enough to send them both crashing to the floor. It's a testament to how much her control has improved that her aura levels itself before Katsuki has been rewound to a toddler. He can feel the wetness of her tears on his shirt. "It's unfair! It never works how I want it to!"

Katsuki's bad at this. He's bad with crying kids. He holds her and pats her back on and off until he can't stand it anymore.

"Hey, you, brat, stop crying."

"I—I'm sorry," she sobs. *Wrong thing to say Katsuki. Wrong thing to say.*

"Nah. I'm telling you to stop because I'll start crying too."

She slaps his face with pudgy hands. "No."

He rolls her around so they're laying side by side and staring up at the ceiling. "Oi. We ain't gonna argue over who has crying rights."

"What's that?"

"Figure of speech."

"What's that?"

"This thing where you say—" His sentence is cut short by a mouthful

of fur. He scrambles to get Satsu's fat ass off his face. "You goddamn heathen." The cat hisses while nuzzling into him, the fucking tsundere. "I swear to god you… what was it? Furball whore?"

Eri laughs wetly. She takes Katsuki's wrist with her hand.

"You think granny is watching us?"

He hopes so. "She'd be embarrassed."

"You won't leave, right Kacchan? Not like mama and papa and granny —"

"I already told ya I won't." He isn't even *capable* of dying.

"Ever?"

"You doubt my pinky promise this much? Fucking brat."

"What are we gonna do without granny?"

"I don't know."

She inhales.

"Don't do that shit with a snotty nose," he scolds and tosses over a pack of tissues from his pocket.

"Sorry." She blows her nose and then: "Tell me a story."

Katsuki groans. "This crap again…uh...There was once an incompetent moron with green hair. He tripped and fell. The end."

"That's a bad story."

"I ain't a storyteller."

"Fuyumi-sensei does voices for all the characters, and her stories are cooler than that."

"Fuck Fuyumi-sensei."

"Is it too hard for you Kacchan?" She did not go there. "Tell me a hero story."

"...Once upon a time there lived a guy called Blasty Man, and he was the biggest piece of shit in existence—"

“She left you everything.”

“Hah?”

“Well, as good as everything,” Aoi says.

Katsuki holds up the deeds and they unfold into a two-meter-long page of twelve-point text bullet points. He owns all the shit listed on here, apparently.

“You’re a lucky guy.”

He gives her the stink eye. Desire to listen to blue niece’s taking advantage of rich old ladies spiels today: zero. “It ain’t lucky that she died. You know I don’t care about this shit. I could sell it all to you for ten yen if you want it so bad.”

“Auntie wanted you to have it.”

“And you’re finally okay with that?”

“Yes.” She’s flustered.

His raised brows stretch the skin on his face. “I don’t get you.”

Aoi shrugs and browses through the folders. The will reading was private she told Katsuki, and no one else in the family knows the details, because other than him, Eri, and blue niece’s little pocket of the family, no one else got *anything*. Healer hag had once told him her relationship with her family was strained, but this is on a whole other level. A leaving your life’s earnings to a stray you’ve known for a year instead of your literal blood relatives you grew up with kind of bad.

“Your family must really suck.” Aoi narrows her eyes at him. “If healer hag hated them this much.”

“Excuse me, dear *cousin*, *Hiryo Shin.* You’re insulting yourself here.”

“Passport name or no, I ain’t one of you that’s for sure.”

“You wouldn’t last a day. If you had siblings, you’d be the one who doesn’t get a trust fund.”

He doesn’t get her. A few weeks ago she was indirectly calling him a parasite, now she’s accepting and cracking jokes. Something started to change in that last week of Koharu being alive and it’s kept changing. But he can’t figure out for the life of him what. So he asks: “Do you

like me now or something?”

She is evidently not expecting the question. Katsuki doesn’t pussyfoot.

“I… realized things. Like how seriously auntie took you, and how childish I acted about it.”

“Took you a bit,” he mutters.

They pack all the deeds into a big green folder for Katsuki to look through later. Her eyes stay on him a lot; as if she’s looking for an opening to say or do something. Her hands are shaking. “What?” Katsuki questions.

“Nothing.”

He’s at home that night, three hours later, finished with tucking Eri in and getting her clothes ready for a recital tomorrow (he didn’t want to go for obvious reasons but she insisted due to her very important role of “helping Fuyumi-sensei play piano granny will be excited to see from the sky”), curled up in his futon.

Dear Katsuki,

By the time you read

His phone vibrates the entire duvet. “For fuck’s sake.” He angrily picks it up and sees a notification for a message from a private number.

Goosebumps blooming on his skin, he taps to the see contents of the message. Three lines.

You ’re being watched.

You and the girl.

Tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

1) i exited ao3 without saving this chapter as a draft and lost all my in-browser edits I swear i almost tore my hair out
2) i used the word deeds instinctively just kind of knowing it was a paperwork term but not rlly sure that it meant property transfer lo and behold it did
3) this chapter has been basically teased since the get-go. i made

koharu's character with the intention of having her kick it before the timeskip. sorry to anyone who wanted her alive lmao TT. the incredible amount of love she's received is super unexpected and honestly heartwarming
4) i hope it's clear how eri is kind of opening up and becoming more cheerful and sassy and carefree despite the shittiness of this particular chapter
5) rainstorms are cliche but i don't give a single fuck. a scene or eri and katsuki 1) cooking together and 2) comforting each other following healer hag's death has been on the bucket list since day one
6) one more chapter to go in this arc
7) the long italics bits in this chapter are excerpts from koharu's letter to katsuki
8) unreliable narrators always
9) idk if this lives up to expectations but...
10) strokes suck
11) i did research on Japanese funerals for this, and even watched this film called departures about a failed cellist getting a job as one of the guys who prepare dead bodies to be put in caskets. interesting stuff.
12) this is a portion of the story I've been very nervous about since it's got a lot of OC dynamics at play and doesn't include many of the other fan-favorite canon characters in this story (like aizawa and izuku and kirishima, etc) plus the general issues that come with the muddy middle of the story, but the reception has been so encouraging i couldn't say enough thanks

Chapter 27: The recital

Chapter Summary

the recital

(tw: attempted kidnapping, bakugou getting triggered, suffocation, self-harm, mildish body horror, threat of suicide, mentions of drug use and drug addiction, the HPSC being child-abusing pieces of shit)

Chapter Notes

i honestly don't know how this chapter ended up so dark. i rewrote a good chunk of it and it just became so dark out of nowhere. I'm so sorry but enjoy the whump i guess
huge sorry for not replying to any comments last chapter I'm just fried mentally lol

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's a stormy Saturday when Hiryo Shin, or 'Kacchan' as Eri calls him, shows up to drop her off in poorly ironed black sweats and a hairstyle so spiky it could rival a sea urchin. His skin is sallow, his eyes a milky red. Quite frankly, he looks like the personification of a sock put in the washing machine on the wrong load, or maybe like a kid who's having the worst day of his life. With that bed head, and those eyebags, and that baby face, he reminds Fuyumi far more of Shouto when he wakes up in a mood than Natsu.

Fuyumi watches him explain something or the other to the receptionist. He looks wrong yet right at the same time. This isn't Hiryo Shin, but whoever it is fitting that body a whole lot more. The mess of spikes peeking from his hoodie make more sense with his face than the over gelled bowl cut ever did, and without the shock of orange-yellow eyes (Where did they go? Are they contacts? He wears glasses as well, so it's clearly an aesthetic choice. But why?) there's a translucent quality about him; as if he'd blend in with the pale cream wall and disappear were it not for his jarring outfit.

Katsuki… she thinks. That's what Eri said his "nickname" is. Why can't Fuyumi be at peace with that explanation?

He's in and out in five minutes. Eri herself seems subdued. Fuyumi knows she's made good friends with one Ibara Suzuki, but the other

girl isn't here today, as it's not a school day. With no one else she's truly comfortable with, Eri sits at her usual table and starts to draw. Fuyumi can't help drawing closer and sitting down in one of the table's other three empty chairs. Her knees are screaming at having to sit in this chair meant for toddlers.

"Morning, Eri-chan," she says. The girl shifts her gaze up in acknowledgment and goes straight back to drawing. Not a talking day today, is it?

"It's your first time coming on Saturdays, right?" Fuyumi attempts to make conversation. "Any special reason…?"

"Granny died." It's like a sucker punch. The way she admits it with such nonchalance, without even looking up from her artwork.

"…My condolences. I'm sorry to hear that, sweetheart."

She doesn't say anything for a long time.

"Granny is watching, that's what you said—" She did say that. When a couple of weeks ago another kid lost their grandparents in the Deika city incident and showed up to school crying. She used Touya as an example to make the statement ring a little stronger for the kids on instinct— she was so used to calling him dead for such a long time it's been hard to adjust, knowing what she knows— before she could fully consider that Touya is part of the League, and the League was suspected of causing the Deika city incident, and Touya may have very well killed her student's family members. The guilt gnawed at her all the way home.

"—so I'm not sad." But her eyes are shiny in the bad way, her lip is puckered in, her nose is scrunched up. Fuyumi gives her hair a gentle ruffle.

"It's okay to be sad. I'm sure your gran is very proud of you." Little kids don't deserve this stuff.

"Mhm," Eri says, inhaling and going back to furiously scrawling all over her page. Fuyumi recalls that she said her family consisted of granny and Kacchan and Satsu the cat. If this granny is indeed her grandmother and not a weird codename for something else as seems to be common in their household, it means the only actual adult (and no, forget what the law says, nineteen-year-olds don't count and Natsu is exhibit A) they had around at home has passed away.

“Who’s going to take care of you now?” she asks carefully.

“Kacchan.”

“Who’s going to take care of him?”

“Me.” Fuyumi can’t stop her lips from stretching into a mix of a grimace and a somber smile. So they’re going to be alone?

“Don’t you need an adult?”

“Kacchan is big.” He *is* old enough to take her in on legal terms, that’s true, but that amount of responsibility at such a young age…

“He is. But he might need help too.”

“We have help.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. Like Fuyumi-sensei.” She’s happy the kid trusts her this much, but it isn’t the answer she was hoping for.

“I mean at home, sweetheart.”

“Kacchan is fine. I don’t want anyone else.” Noting Eri gradually closing in on herself, Fuyumi sits back and stops with the interrogation. They’re Hiryos. Their family is enormous. Although the elder has his quirk listed as electrical interference (rather odd) there’s still a good chance for Eri’s mutation quirk to end up being something healing-related. As long as her quirk remains a question mark the larger family would never dream of kicking them out. If you have any iteration of the family quirk you’re locked for life —that’s how a lot of these old blood clans work. Helps that their quirk genes are so dominant any kid born into the family will be as good as guaranteed to get one.

Then again, Eri’s eyes are much redder than her ID picture promises, and they’re nowhere near the typical Hiryo gold. Add to this the older brother and his contacts… something isn’t aligning here.

Such thoughts swim around in Fuyumi’s mind for the rest of the day. Hiryo comes to pick Eri up late afternoon, and it’s obvious to anyone with half-decent eyesight he’s been crying. Knowing what she knows now, his disheveled appearance makes a lot more sense. Fuyumi

chooses not to say anything, instead watching from the reception as the two of them disappear into the rain-soaked street under a frilly polka dot umbrella that looks like it came straight out of granny's attic. That's a grim thought.

Katsuki… Katsuki… Katsuki with spiky hair and washed out eyes and a moderately abrasive personality… where has she heard that before?

"What's picking at your brain, Todoroki-san?" Kanagawa asks upon finding Fuyumi clicking away at her computer when all the kids have left for this day and they're supposed to compile data and grade assignments and submit schedules for the next. She's a little ahead with her work, so she's afforded herself a moment of personal research.

"Oh nothing," she mumbles absentmindedly, grateful when Kanagawa leaves upon seeing Fuyumi's not going to give her the desired attention.

Katsuki… she types in the search bar. To an overwhelming degree, the suggested search results are various iterations of Bakugou Katsuki. A heavy pit settles in Fuyumi's stomach. She hated the messy reports on this kid from the start, and after learning of his letter, it's only gotten worse. They owe him. Her whole family does. He decided he'd risk himself and tell them everything he knew even after Touya helped hold him captive for over a month. Fuyumi knows he didn't die at the hands of the League because they've got the handwritten letter to prove it, but for him to be the acting parent of one of her kids? It would mean everything about him, and Eri is fabricated.

She presses enter on a simple search for Bakugou Katsuki with trembling hands and brings up Hiryo Shin's passport photo. They're as eerily alike as they are different. Hiryo Shin's jaw is more angular, his skin is sallower and sunburnt, he wears glasses that clearly have a real prescription, several knick-knack scars litter his face, his hair color is off, and his eyes are all wrong, but taking into consideration general facial structure… they might as well be clones. The small pointed button nose, the shape of their lips, the height of their cheekbones, it's a match.

It couldn't be…

"Shouto," she asks over the phone that evening when she's arrived at home (the new house without dad in it) and had some of the food

mom fixed. “Did you ever get any more information on that classmate of yours… Bakugou Katsuki?”

Shouto’s breath hitches audibly from the other end of the line. Fuyumi knows her brother gets clammy whenever Bakugou is brought up. *“Why*?”

Is it worth it explaining her suspicion when she may be very well off mark? It wouldn’t do to get Shouto and his friend’s hopes up. “No reason. Curiosity.”

“*Sorry, nee-san. Something might have come up recently with the Hassaikai raid—”* That one hero mission that was all over the news way back when? The one where the authorities had failed to retrieve the keystone of the Eight precepts’s operation, a little girl… oh no. “*— But outsiders aren’t given information on that case.”*

“Right. And that girl who the heroes never got to… you remember her name?”

“Emi or Eri—“ Oh no. *“If I recall right.”*

“And this Bakugou… did he have a nickname?”

“You’re being weird, nee-san,” Shouto breathes. *“But I guess Midoriya called him Kacchan—“*

The rest of Shouto’s words fizzle out. Her grip tightens painfully around her mobile. She’s right, isn’t she? She’s somehow stumbled upon two of the most wanted kids in Japan, and it’s taken her over a month to recognize either of them.

Considering these new nuggets of information, it all makes sense. Their strange behavior. *Our parents are… out of commission.* The disparity between their passport pictures and their appearances in real life. The weird naming patterns. The lack of Hiryo clan typical quirks… Heck, even Eri’s otherwise inexplicable aversion to plague masks.

“Nee-san? You okay?”

She sits down on her bed and rubs at her temple. What now? What now? Does she call the cops? If that’s Bakugou, not only has he faked his identity, he’s only seventeen at best. He’s a literal child. She can’t… She should… Oh god. She’s been greeting the kid Touya tortured every morning with a smile on her face and he most

definitely knows who Fuyumi is.

“Nee-san?”

She swallows dry. “I’m fine, Shouto. Thanks for the help.”

“Are you sure you’re a—“

“Sorry. Gotta go. Uh… mom’s calling for me! Yes. She is.” Fuyumi hangs up and falls over into her bed.

This is so bad.

After mulling it over for hours on Sunday, she decides she’ll wait to see them again at school and confront them directly before contacting the authorities. For morning classes, they’re nowhere to be seen.

But this Monday is recital day. And it’s a big deal, the recital. They hold it every year at a theater venue some two blocks down from the school — a collaboration with a private middle school on the other side of town with a similar educational philosophy— it’s open-entry, and they even invite heroes or public speakers. It’s Hawks this year, she’s been told, but Fuyumi is so used to the man swinging by their house and annoying their dad at work and bringing mom flowers and making low-quality conversation with Natsu he’s not the novelty he might have once been. The bus ride over with the kids who were in class is hectic and messy, and the more they encroach on the afternoon the worse it gets. The lobby of the secondary stage they’re using is packed with dressed up posh parents and screaming siblings, the main theater hall and its rows of cushioned velvet seats are quickly filling up with attendees, and the backstage is a dark, drafty, and prop-riddled box of chaos, but a good deal of Fuyumi’s stress melts away when she spots Eri and Bakugou among the people filtering through to the dressing room. Bakugou offers a small wave, eyes darting around the dim preparation area in suspicion, while Eri — dressed in a sweet blue one-piece, bangs pinned to her temples with little daisy hair clips — runs over with this huge smile tacked on her face. Thank god they ended up coming.

“We’re gonna play piano, right sensei?” Fuyumi’s heart squeezes itself like one would squeeze a soggy dish sponge. She *had* planned to confront them right away… but it would surely ruin the mood of the recital. If her guess is correct, this girl was in villain captivity as close as last winter. It has to be her first-ever recital of this kind. Fuyumi’s dramatic gotcha moment can wait, can’t it?

“I’m glad you could come, Eri-chan.”

“I remember all the notes, I promise. I practiced on my melodica at home. Even though I missed morning—“

“You’ll play, it’s alright. Calm down,” she scolds gently. “You look very pretty today.”

The girl twirls a little, and the bottom half of her dress puffs up. “You think so? Kacchan did my hair.”

It’s so neat for who might be the guy who made a name for himself in the general public for being a violent brute. Then again, his letter had been neat as well, regardless of the subject matter. Fuyumi turns to the door again to get another look at him, only to see he’s long disappeared into the crowd and headed for his designated seat in the audience.

It goes well, the recital. Fuyumi and a string quartet from the middle school do most of the accompaniment playing but Eri, despite initial hiccups courtesy of audience induced stage fright, nails what few parts she has as promised. Fuyumi keeps her eyes on Bakugou the entire performance and notes what seems to be alertness, unease. Whenever Eri isn’t playing, he’s turning left or right, taking in all of his surroundings, calculating the smallest of changes and differences. The parent sitting next to him coughs, he jerks slightly. Someone in front of him moves out of their seat for the bathroom, he follows them with his gaze until they’ve left. Is he looking for something? Between the constant accompaniment she has to play, it’s hard for Fuyumi to carefully consider and figure out.

Once final bows have been completed, the noise of clapping has subsided and the curtains have been drawn on the theatre’s stage, Fuyumi wrangles her batch of kids into the back, does a quick role call, makes sure those who are leaving right away get to their parents, and delivers the rest to Kanagawa and Ishiyama. Her colleagues have arranged their students in single file lines and are making sure they get up the stairs and into the balcony sitting areas fixed for them with no accidents. Kids tend to like non-standard things like private box seats, the ones in this theater are well secured and quirk-proof, and they’ll have a good view of the play prepared by the middle school students and the shadow puppet show meant as a closing surprise for everyone. “Can you take my group up too?” she asks, feeling guilty for saddling her colleagues with more work but unable to keep going

without confronting Bakugou or Hiryo or whoever he is. She knows he's not gone yet, because Eri is right there in line chatting with Ibara, but he might show up any minute and leave before they get the proper chance to talk.

"Of course Todoroki-san!" says Kanagawa. "Is it a bathroom emergency?" she whispers.

Fuyumi makes an (in this case helpful) constipated face. "Sure. That."

"You poor dear. Go. Don't worry about them." The older woman turns to the children. "Hey, kiddoes. Todoroki-sensei has to handle a little something, so you're gonna follow me, m'kay?"

"What…"

"But Sensei… you'll miss the shadow puppets—"

"We're not supposed to know about that you— you— stupid head."

"Hey!"

"Is it poop Sensei? A big poop—?!"

"Sensei will be going now…" She claps, mouths a desperate thank you to Kanagawa, and as good as skips down the stairs.

The volume levels of the near-empty lobby, hiked up only by the elevator music humming low from the speakers, the footsteps of the occasional usher and other staff, and the few parents buying snack food at the corner stand, are a pleasant relief to her ears and building headache. Now. Bakugou.

Speak of the devil, he's entering the lobby from the theater's hall right as Fuyumi has set her eyes on it. Fuyumi walks to him with long strides.

"Where's Eri?" he says.

"She's up in the private boxes with the rest of the kids. There's the drama to watch."

"We can't stay for that. We gotta get home."

"And where is that supposed to be?" It slips out. Bakugou's eyes (he's got his full Hiryo Shin getup today) narrow.

“What—?”

He stops talking when a brown-haired man passes by them on his way to the food stand. She can’t do this here. It’s too exposed a place.

“Come with me,” she says, gripping his wrist and dragging him up the stairs to the private boxes. “They’re up here.” Two sets of muffled footsteps sound on the carpeted path. But instead of taking him to the boxes being used, Fuyumi takes him to the one at the very corner of this theater — the one they were told was out of commission by the venue staff at the briefing. It’s bound to be insulated for one way sound like all the other boxes, and no one will bother them either. The space is tiny, three by three or so inside, the few armchairs set up by the glass partition dusty and covered in various knick-knacks, from rolls of spare carpet to leftover props. Fuyumi flips open the light, pushes Bakugou forward, and closes the door behind them.

“ Oi. What is this place—”

“Are you Bakugou Katsuki?” she asks flat out. She’s always had a bit of a problem with being too hesitant to do things. Not today.

He gapes, in shock or incredulity, Fuyumi can’t tell. “…No?”

“You aren’t?”

“…I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You don’t?” Is she wrong or is he lying? “Why do you wear contacts? Why is your hair naturally spiky?”

“Because I like how they look, and because I was born that way?”

“You wear contacts even in your ID photo?”

“That’s… related to my quirk. Colors come out all wrong on cameras. My hair is yellower too, in that photo,” he justifies.

“Then why does Eri call you Kacchan, as in Katsuki, if your name isn’t Katsuki?”

He sighs and for a moment, Fuyumi thinks she’s got him. Then he swallows and says: “We… uh… don’t got healing quirks, neither of us. Not good for Hiryo kids. The rest of the family never liked us, especially the brat. It’s kind of dumb… but we made the new names as a fun thing to have for ourselves, a new identity, if you will, since we

didn't like the people who gave us the old ones. I hate talking about it…"

She's a hundred percent off the mark! Oh god. What has she done?!

"Look, lady. We've been having a hard time as of late." The lights dim, and they hear the slightly shrill sound of that one middle schooler's viola, implying the start of the performance. After adjusting to the new brightness levels, Hiryo picks up where he left off. "I'd appreciate it if you let us be with your weirdo accusations. Eri likes you. Don't make me pull her out of here."

He turns around, struggles to maneuver the messy floor without tripping, and makes to open the door. The handle rattles in his hold. "Hey, did you lock this thing?"

"No…"

He shakes the handle more. The old door creaks but doesn't move. "What the fuck is this then?" he barks out, half the smoothness of his tone gone. "You fucking around with me, or what?"

"I'm not!" Fuyumi says, hurrying over in alarm. "I didn't lock it, I swear." She doesn't even have a key.

"So explain this!"

The handle is obviously jammed, a weak attempt at using one of her bobby pins fails fast, and when she leans down to the crack where the door is supposed to meet the floor, no light or anything leaks inside. She sticks a pinky through the crack and it comes into contact with something solid. It's as if someone has blocked their exit with a piece of bulky furniture, locked them in. Goosebumps break out on her forearms.

"You called the cops, didn't you? You arranged this." Hiryo mutters, running a hand through his hair, messing it up. "Damned Todorokis. *Fuck you and your whole family!* Are you the one sending creepy-ass texts to my mobile? How long have you known? How long have you been fucking planning this?"

What's he saying? "I *don't* know what's going on."

He brushes her out of the way to try and knock the door down with his shoulder. "Damn thing won't budge."

“It’s no use. I think there’s a piece of furniture jamming the other side.”

“Hah?! D’you arrange that too? We would’ve heard something if a bitch was dragging a fucking dresser across that crispy ass carpet!"

“They’re soundproof, the booths.”

“Your phone then! Call your sensei pals or something.”

A swift pat-down of her pockets results in nothing. She left it on one of the desks backstage, she remembers. “I don’t have it.”

“How convenient. Use mine then! For fuck’s sake!” he says and throws her his phone before going back to pacing and pushing at the door on and off. “And the Sun asked—“ narrates the middle schooler on stage. The numbers blur in front of Fuyumi’s eyes, and she realizes she hasn’t memorized those of any of her coworkers yet. “I d—don’t know their numbers,” she admits.

“Fuck!” Hiryo kicks the door so hard it makes Fuyumi wince. “You’re still acting like you’ve got nothing to do with this?! Who’ve you given your information to?” His breathing picks up. “The police? The HPSC? Fucking UA?!”

“What information?”

“That I’m *Bakugou*,” he spits out the name, “Wormbrained numbskull!”

“You’re Bakugou?!”

“No, I’m your dog. Of course, I’m him you dim-witted brain-dead ice princess ass fucker. Fuck. Fuck.” Bakugou kicks one of the shelves this time, knocking over a box of craft paint tins and spilling liquid color all over his feet. Fuyumi is stunned. She was right this whole time? “I should’ve run my ass out of here the moment you showed up. You and your fucked up excuse of a drama queen family. Oh, *fuck* all of you—“

“You’re having a panic attack, Bakugou-kun—“

“Call me Katsuki at least, you bitch. I swear to fuck.” His strained breath hitches. “Tell your cop friends to open the door right now. Right fucking now—”

“I don’t have cop friends!” Fuyumi yells. A hush falls over the little

room, interrupted only by Bakugou's choked-out panting and the wishy-washy acting of the play on stage. She inhales and attempts to compose herself. "I only found out on Saturday. I haven't told anyone. Whoever's sending you text messages, it isn't me. The door's been locked from the outside, as well." Her hairpin won't even go in. That means whoever locked it left the key inside perpendicular to the hole, so even if she and Bakugou did have a key they'd be unable to use it.

"From the outside?"

"Someone locked us in."

"Fuck," he whispers, leaning against the shelves. The air smells of mold.

"You have to calm down, Bakugou-kun."

"*I know that,*" he says as he places a palm on his chest and appears to do some sort of counting exercise. "I can... blow the door. My blood is dynamite— it's full of NG."

"You'd blow us up too."

"Got any better ideas?!" he snaps. "Fucking fifty millionth time… I just want to be left the fuck alone. I shouldn't have shown up at all—"

He powerwalks to the box's window, presses his face against the glass, and seems to make an extraordinary effort to make out the people in the other boxes one by one. "Oi. Which one's the brat in, Todoroki?!"

Fuyumi points to the third box from the left, third tier, inside of which she recognizes a lot of her other kids. Bakugou squints, mutters something about his damn useless eyes, and his shallow breaths get even worse. "Isn't that her friend in the front?! Oi. You!"

"That is Suzuki, yes," Fuyumi confirms, spotting the pink-haired girl between three of her other students. Eri is nowhere to be seen.

"But the brat's not there is she?!"

Fuyumi's heart sinks. She must be. Looking harder doesn't offer answers.

"She isn't is she?! Hey, answer me!"

"No," Fuyumi chokes out, "but she could be in the bathroom, or behind the bigger kids or—"

“To hell with your bathroom,” Bakugou says, more to himself than anyone. “I got a text and everything. Am I that *fucking stupid*?! She’s gone. They’re gonna take the kid and I fucking promised I’d never fucking leave her—”

Her stomach swoops with every word of his mutter storm. “Who’s they?”

“Fuck knows! Maybe the UA fuckers, maybe my new ‘family’, maybe your psychopathic brother.“ She flinches. “Can’t you people keep your big ass noses out of our damned business?!”

“I’m so sorry,” she says. “About Touya. I’m so sorry—“ Bakugou kicks her shin.

“Are you Toyota?”

“No…”

“Then save it, bitch. Ain’t your fault. I don’t buy into that sins of the father crap. Wannabe stapler is a grown-ass man. Get your moron of an old man to apologize to me, if you think someone should do it in flame boy’s place—“ He grunts without warning. Then, what seems like the fabric-covered form of a tiny human hand protrudes from the pocket area of his hoodie. Fuyumi yelps as the hand keeps struggling against fabric, and she watches Bakugou pull out a zippered piece of textile and throw it on the floor. The hand continues to push against the fabric square. Bakugou rushes to unzip it and out the flap comes… Eri? Or the upper half of her at least.

“Oh my god,” Fuyumi says, practically feeling her blood pressure saunter into dangerous levels. “Help! Help please—” the girl cries, but when Bakugou tries to tug her out of the zipper portal (?) entirely it’s as if someone is tugging on her from the other side. Eri lets out a pained whine as Bakugou’s hold on her breaks and she slips back where she came from. Bakugou curses and jumps through the portal without a second thought spared to Fuyumi. Just like that, she’s alone in this rickety private box. “Moon Boy lunged at the villain, but his quirk was too strong—“ continues the play. Fuyumi’s heartbeat is almost louder. “Motherfucker—“ a distant Bakugou seems to say, followed by a thud. She cranes her head closer to the zippered portal, and she sees a whole hallway, the one on the opposite end of the theater.

What is this? A quirk? Whose quirk? Is someone trying to kidnap her student? The same someone who locked them in here and jammed the

door? It sounds as though Bakugou predicted something like this would happen. They might have a villain attack on their hands! Has Fuyumi helped whoever this is out without knowing it, by dragging Bakugou in here and wasting his time in the first place? She has to do something.

So she holds her breath and falls through the fabric pocket, indeed ending up on the other side of the hall. In her dizziness, it takes her a moment to regain her composure and bearings. Her clothes are all dusty from being in that room so long, and several spots of her dress for special occasions are stained with the red paint Bakugou knocked over. Said red paint proves somewhat useful though, because Bakugou's shoes were also hit, and he's left her a convenient trail of footsteps. She can hear thudding and cracking and cursing and glass breaking. Plain old running won't do. Abandoning her heels, she ices the floor in thin layers like she used to love doing with Natsu when they were kids and uses it to slide faster than she's even slid before, stopping only to take sharp turns and trip down staircases until she can see the back of Bakugou's pale hair. He powers through a door pauses, which lets Fuyumi catch up to him.

The space beyond him opens up. They're in the theater's third stage, the one with the unconventional glass windows that's in the middle of renovations It's dark. Footsteps echo in the giant space, and that makes it all the more difficult to figure out where they're coming from. Eri's consistent and muffled calls for help suffer from the same effect.

"We need to call the police—"

She's ignored. Bakugou takes off like a rocket. Like not being able to see is a minor inconvenience. Fuyumi wants to cry. She still has the guy's phone, so she could use its flash and attempt to follow, but even then, what would she be able to do? She doesn't have a hero license, and she's already feeling the quirk overuse burning her palms meant to make snow and not ice. She'd be useless. She can't handle this alone.

Staring at that dark hall, it dawns on her like an epiphany. Who says she has to? They've got a whole number two hero in the audience. That's right! She'll get Hawks and he'll be sure to help.

Katsuki runs like a man possessed. He runs with sticky paint-dipped

sneakers digging into his heels and air resistance brushing his ears. This is what he gets for wanting to do something nice despite being warned a mess would be happening today. First bitch ass Todoroki the girl version figures out who he is and decides to pull some type of interrogation bullshit, next his fucking kid gets stolen. To fuck with it.

He hops over the seats of the empty theater hall row by row, careful not to knock them or make any unnecessary noises. It's unsure if the kidnapper knows Katsuki has the advantage in a place like this regardless of the echo and hammering of rain outside, but whoever they are remains cautious as they step on the stairs of the stage. That purple aura. *You're being watched*. It's got the be who he thinks it is.

"Hey, little bitch, come the fuck back here—" he calls out, more to see how the kidnapper will react. The thing about their aura is, it's got very little concrete shape to it. Eri's drapes off her skin and sort of frames her and her horn in particular, while kidnapper's is all irregular, in some places jagged in some smooth and rounded. The moonlight is not enough to make out their physical body

"Kid, you answer me at least!"

Nothing. She doesn't seem like she's moving. He's fucking *pissed*.

"You drug her to sleep or something, fucker?!"

No response. That's probably what happened. Drugs took a bit to kick in. As disgusting as it is for him to think about, they're both too valuable to just be killed. If they wanted to kill her, they'd have long done so. It's a fact that removes at least one problem from his list of ninety-nine more. Fuck, he wishes he had Explosion. That's what he's thinking as he's chasing the kidnapper through the back of this stage and watching him climb up to the platform where upper stage lights are fixed. Why are they doing this, hauling themselves up here when there's only one way to do it? Doesn't the kidnapper get this is cornering themselves? Or do they fucking want that?

Katsuki makes it to the top of the metallic platform and finds the spotlights pointed at the ceiling. Eri's form is collapsed by the back wall, while the kidnapper's appears to be crouching by the last of the stage lights. Katsuki's only ran halfway across the platform to where Eri is before he's hearing the thrum of a generator, followed by the flip of a switch and a flicker of too bright lights. A flash of blindness before Katsuki's eyes manage to adjust, and he comes face to face with his kidnapper. They're unfastening some sort of goggles from their

face and swiftly flinging them off the side of the platform. It takes a few seconds to hear the crack of them hitting the floor.

“You’re some type of shapeshifter, ain’t ya?”

They crack their knuckles. It looks like a dude, stupidly tall with wide-ass shoulders and a waist and hips so tiny there’s no way adult size organs fit inside. His legs are like bending sticks a meter and a half in length, he’s clad in a brown stealth suit outfitted with a supply belt and embroidered with numbers. Lots of the same number. #23 to be particular.

“You were the fucker in the carnival costume, and the pushy lady at the clothes store, and the guy behind me in the registration line—“ The aura gives it away, and they all had the same brown hair and eyes, even though the rest of his shapes were not as imbalanced and freaky looking at this one. He’s built like a toy, like a caricature of a human.

“Indeed,” the kidnapper concedes. His voice is smooth and low and so very punchable. “Did my aura give me away?”

“Shut up.” But Katsuki’s mind is running a mile a minute. He knows about that. A lot of people know about his power, rumors are everywhere, but very, very few people know how exactly it works, or that he refers to the embodiment of the quirk factor he can see as an “aura.” That would mean…

#23’s slap stings. Katsuki staggers back. Damnit. He can’t get in a single proper hit. This guy either melts and molds his body into a new shape when Katsuki gets too close, or he’s too plain fast to get close to at all. Katsuki’s plan was to push and push until he could blow past the guy and get to Eri to make sure she’s safe, but he’s the one getting put on the defensive. And kidnapper freak is so fast he’s exhausting to fight against. Soon, Katsuki is a safe meter away trying to hide his panting, zero progress made while kidnapper freak is standing still, barely having broken a sweat.

“Bakugou Katsuki. Born 20th April 2XXX. Seventeen years. Damaged Q-factor of original quirk explosion has caused an abnormal increase in nitroglycerin blood levels. Will not register on electronic devices. B-grade hand-to-hand combat. Unusual regeneration… is capable of interacting with the quirk factor,” the man counts off, his voice amplified by the theater as that of a stage actor would be. “The commission knows everything about you.”

“The commission… is that who sent you?” Katsuki asks, one because he wants to know who goes on the hitlist and two because he needs to buy time. “That sick fuck Chisaki took notes, didn’t he? You fuckers read that shit?!”

“You are an asset. We have many sources. Though some of your… tactics remain elusive.”

Fuck he’s punchable. He’s *so* fucking punchable. A half-assed lasso made out of overstretched fingers is swung across the platform, and Katsuki barely dodges it. He leaps towards the failed rope of flesh and grips the aura, but it’s been so long, and the burn is so bad it makes his vision go white. He lets go and hisses.

“…So your power burns.” Katsuki stares at his straining hand as if it committed a personal offense. Of all times for the power to fail! Kidnapper’s flesh lasso makes a slippery noise as it’s retracted and that regained mass re-inflates his bodybuilder's shoulder. His quirk must work on the basis of sustained mass or volume.“It’s strong, I confess. And I can see why it’s left your foes at a loss before. But we’ve been analyzing you for months now, me even more so since I’ve been trailing you. You can’t touch my quirk if you’re too slow to touch me. Simple.”

He’s right, the donkey! God it pisses Katsuki off. But he’s not some brash and prideful middle schooler anymore, that he’ll go and attack out of sheer wanton anger. He needs a plan and he needs it fast. *Think. Think dumbass think.* What’s around him? A couple of extra stage lights, electrical and steel wires, planks of wood… fuck. Kidnapper has got to have some weakness. His quirk is rendering his body shapeless, but surely it has limits. Katsuki has to test them.

When the next long-range swing of his stretched-out arm comes, Katsuki pulls the butterfly knife up his sleeve out and stabs at it hard. It seems like it’s not going to do shit, cutting through his skin like cutting rubber, but then the rubber pops and extrudes outward in a slimy puss of blood and viscous liquid muscle and bone mass. It’s nothing big, but kidnapper’s newly amputated hand hits the floor, and his stump continues to leak painfully. Katsuki smirks to combat his queasiness. Kidnapper’s innards may be all liquid and morphable, but they’re still there, in the end. If he has to gut this guy manually to get the kid back, he’ll fucking do it.

The victory is short-lived, however. The stump proceeds to *grow a new hand*, grab the one Katsuki cut off from the floor, and absorb its mass

right back. “Bakugou Katsuki… you should not have done that. You should come quietly. Fighting back only hurts you.”

“Fuck off with your bullshit!”

“You will not come quietly?” the guy asks, his hand making a full three-sixty rotation on his wrist as it’s fixed back in place. His arm is still overstretched, and his body proper is a good three meters back. Must take a lot of fucking core strength to hold it up this steady. Katsuki’s eyes blur, catching again on Eri’s collapsed form.

“You will not come quietly?”

He has to get to her. He doesn’t know how but he has to get to her—

Kidnapper’s arm stretches the tiniest bit more, enough to land on Katsuki’s shoulders. He can see the mass move through the hand in a peristaltic motion and feels the fingers overstretch to get an iron grip on his shoulder. Then, instead of sucking the arm back in like he did the first time, the kidnapper uses the elasticity of the limb to rapidly shrink the distance between them and fling himself toward katsuki like the volley of a slingshot. It happens in a split second — kidnapper’s mass deforms and melts into the consistency of whipped goop. It’s as if Katsuki is an ant shot by an unexpected and unsolicited wad of chewy caramel. It’s everywhere, stuck to his face and inching beneath the sleeves of his hoodie and clogging up his already crusty sneakers— *he can’t see and if it gets in his fucking nose he won’t be able to breathe, and what if he swallows it oh fucking fuck—*

“Victim of incident #574 Area 21A Tatooin Station last April, where you were suffocated by sludge for circa fifteen minutes; described tests by the doctor of the League of villains involving prolonged water submersion with the threat of drowning or suffocation as punishment for non-compliance; extreme aversion to having airways disrupted as noted by Chisaki Kai… it is reasonable to assume you have a problem with not being able to breathe.”

The voice comes from everywhere and he can’t do *anything*. He can’t touch his face and rip the sludgy bastard off when he’s stuck to Katsuki’s body as if he were some sort of macabre horror movie organic version of those iron maiden torture machines because *he can’t use his hands he can't—*

“By incorporating the right amount of air into my mass of cells I can shift my body into a moldable whipped slime state. I could force myself inside your airways and your digestive tract and explode your

body from the inside out. I could puncture your arteries or make contact with your brain through your bloodstream. I can feel and control every molecule of my body, Bakugou Katsuki, and Trigger enhanced as my quirk is, youhav e no countermeasures for it. Any regenerative ability is moot if I split your body into unsalvageable chunks."

Katsuki's knees give, and the damn sludge is so far up his nose he can practically taste it. *Fuck this. Fuck this.* He keeps his mouth and eyes stubbornly shut, but there's foamy goop picking at his eyelashes, and even more, begging his lips to open the fuck up *and he can't he doesn't want to he can't fucking do this anymore—*

"We are taught to know and utilize all the weaknesses of our targets, Bakugou Katsuki. Their triggers, especially so. It is far from my favorite thing in the world, so I implore you. Give up and come quietly!"

What the fuck is this shithead talking about?! What the fuck is he still talking for?! Why's he acting like Katsuki is fucking forcing him to become a life-sized unstickable leech?! *He's going to die he's going to die he's going to die he wants to give up but he can't give up he can't he can't do anything.*

So close is kidnapper and his quirk Katsuki's skin begins to make contact with the aura on autopilot. Kidnapper grunts in mild discomfort, while Katsuki fucking screams because it burns so bad and it won't go away and now the damn sludge is in his mouth and—

"Katachi, that's enough." The pressure lifts, instantaneous, all at once, as if someone has uttered the magic word. Without care or eyes in the world for anything else, Katsuki rolls over, coughs, and vomits all over the polished metal platform. Polished metal. He closes his eyes and vomits again.

"Katachi, that's enough," Hawks says, and Fuyumi can only watch, horrified, as the vaguely human silhouetted mess of beige and brown goop on the shifting platform melts off the person it was covering and transforms into a whole new human, suited in brown, brunette— the guy who passed them in the lobby at the very start of this— the guy Fuyumi mistook for a regular attendee. Bakugou, newly released from whatever… *that* was, rolls on the floor looking utterly wrecked, and proceeds to puke what has to be his whole stomach out.

"…What did you do to him?!" Fuyumi says, voice shrill in fear. The

worst of it all is that Hawks no longer looks like the helpful hero she begged for help a mere ten minutes ago, he looks like he knows exactly what's going on, and just allowed it to happen. Making any sort of movement around Bakugou sends him into another round of puking and flinching, so Fuyumi, having spotted Eri laid on the opposite end of the platform like a ragdoll, decides to at least make herself useful this way and check on the kid. She's fine, only asleep. Thank god.

Holding her up, Fuyumi walks back over to the other three people on the platform with a lot of reluctance.

"What is this, Hawks-san?"

The winged hero seems to be handing off some sort of medicine bottle to the tremoring brown-haired man, while Bakugou continues to struggle with breathing and has this wide-open expression on his face. Fuyumi tries to step closer, but he jerks away the moment she's caught by his peripheral vision. Any more involuntary shifting and he'll fling himself off the platform entirely.

"Hawks-san?!" He's muttering something about a communication device and paying her zero attention.

"What the fuck is going?!" she demands, voice raised, and *that* gets his attention. His buddy the kidnapper is sitting pretty cross-legged right next to him, tremors no more. "What did you do to this— to this child?! Are you in on this whole scheme?! I won't… I won't let you hurt my students. I heard everything your friend was saying to him. I'm— I— Look at him! It's as if he got sent to hell! Explain yourselves right now!"

Hawks sighs. "It's complicated, Todoroki-san—"

"What's complicated you— you—" She swallows. "Tell me what's going on Hawks-san please. This is… it's…" *Terrifying.*

"I'll tell ya what's going on." She startles where she stands and whips her head around to Bakugou and his destroyed voice. "I'm the food, yeah? Me and her, we're the food. Your little buddy Hawk man and his little buddy, they want some. They're doing the dirty work for their little commission. They're the little pimps." He stares straight at her, an almost film-covered quality to his eyes. "If I don't walk out of here," he says slowly. "Left alone, and without a scratch on my fucking kid," Shifting, a knife from his pocket to his hands in a blink, his sleeve hiked up and shallow cut on his wrist beneath an old-

looking thick white scar. “In the next five minutes.” Watery blood pooling on his grayish skin. “I’ll slit my wrists right here, bleed out on his platform, light myself on fire, and blow the whole theater to bits.”

Fuyumi gasps. He looks *gone*. “Bakugou-kun—“

“I told you to call me fucking Katsuki.”

“Katsuki-kun—“

“Shut up. Shut up damned Todoroki motherfucker. Try me. You two should know since you did all this “research” and your precious little commission knows “everything about me” that my blood is dynamite. The good stuff. You forced my quirk handling back there and my vision is way blurrier, so I bet my quirk level went up by a hundred or so. More good stuff. One percent. Two. I don’t know. Enough. I could take out the whole block, depending on how much I get to bleed out. You two might make it, but all those civilians back there… who the fuck knows if they get to walk out of here smithereens or not!”

Hawks laughs, and Fuyumi kind of wants to slap him. “You’re a funny kid—“ Fuyumi flinches as Bakugou runs the knife deeper without hesitation and a bubble of blood gushes out and onto the platform. “Hey okay whoa—“

“You think I’m playing around birdie? All bark and no bite? I’m an irredeemable piece of shit villain scum trash. Weren’t you warned, that I’m unstable and a menace to society or whatever else the fuck they're calling me? Didn’t your commission buddies tell you that so you could feel better about delivering me to a lab and throwing the kid into some child soldier program? *Over my dead goddamn body,*” he spits out. “Four minutes.”

Hawks’ feathers glint but he recoils without doing a thing when Bakugou drags that knife up and into his wrist before yanking it out, turning his hand around and allowing more and more blood to drip. Using his still free hand, he kisses the pulse point of his neck with the blade.

“Stop—“ Fuyumi can’t watch this anymore. It’s not right. He’s Shouto’s age, for god’s sake.

“You know, I heard there’s a real big artery in here, lots of pressure, that dynamite comes out like a fucking fountain. Three *fucking* minutes.”

“Fine, fine. I got it. Todoroki-san, please put the girl down next to him, will you? In a spot that uh… doesn’t have puke or blood on it.”

It’s kind of hard to find that kind of spot. That’s how bad the situation is. Bakugou shifts himself over the moment she does it and his face softens.

“I only gave her a pacifying drug—“ explains the brunette kidnapper man.

“I’ll shove this so far up your ass it’ll come out the other side.”

“Edgy aren’t you—?” A whoosh cuts through the air as that knife Bakugou was holding embeds itself into a feather Hawks propped up in front of his shoulder at the last second. Fuyumi’s going to have a heart attack.

“Now you don’t have your knife anymore.”

With a flat face, Bakugou turns his pant pockets outwards and out fall three, four, five-pocket knives.

“Damn.”

“One motherfucking minute.”

“You got your deal. The kid’s right there.”

“Part two of the deal, *left alone*. Walk the fuck away from me. I guess you got the brain of a chicken too.”

“Okay, look,” Hawks says, any nonchalance rendered off his tone. “I’m sorry Katachi had to go hardcore with you, but this whole thing is a huge misunderstanding.”

“I don’t think I misunderstood your buddy kidnapping my kid and molesting me for five minutes a little earlier.”

“Hear me out, okay? First of all, Todoroki-san here has nothing to do with this. She happened to be here. Second of all, we’re not out to get you.”

Bakugou scoffs. “If you're banking on all the torture having given me idiot syndrome go find some other poor sob to swindle. The sky is green, next, that’s what you gonna tell me?”

“I know it doesn’t look the best, but Katachi had the commission’s

bugs on him until a few minutes ago. That footage goes through me first because I'm his supervisor, but we need it to be as realistic as possible. Higher-ups haven't heard a peep so far."

"Hawks-sama… you mean?"

"Mhm. I'm setting all of you free."

"If you don't get to the point in two seconds all these knives on the floor are gonna find themselves a chicken-shaped chopping board—"

"To put it simply, Bakugou," Hawks responds. "You're half right. A division of the HPSC black ops, unfortunately, operated by yours truly, has been assigned to capture you and little girlie down there. Her, they'll put in the same program they shoved me and Katachi. You… you're a little old, but they'll think of something…" His gaze turns to Fuyumi. "Ah, Todoroki-san. I trust you know not to repeat any of this to anyone. Top secret, you know?" Fuyumi is in the twilight zone.

"Back on track, chicken fucker."

"Right right. Of course. Anyway, that's what they wanna do. To be frank, you're interesting to me too. And resilient. The fact that you forced Katachi to use his strongest move… and this is proof enough of that." It seems more like a cry for help to Fuyumi if she's honest but she's starting to think Hawks has no idea what a healthy self-image means either.

"Out of the whole division, only Katachi here tracked you. Thanks to a few helpful tips from an informant as I understand." Brunette boy nods eagerly. "I kept the reports to myself without him knowing and altered what I sent to the higher-ups. To lower the chance of leaks and make everything as realistic as possible not even he was told of my part of the plan. The only plan he was told, involved taking first Eri then you. After reading all the reports and doing a little tailing myself well… I have no intention of turning you in. The Commission… they suck ass." His smile is lopsided and pained. "They hooked this guy on Trigger because his quirk becomes stupidly strong when he takes it, and now that he's so addicted a bad crash will kill him they refuse to give him rehab or let him go, and that's just one story. I don't wanna be the guy who flushes new kids into that system. That's why we're going to pretend this went a little different. The footage from Katachi's bodycams earlier's gonna be a key part of making it believable. Sorry 'bout your rep Bakugou, but we're going to move

this a couple of neighborhoods and pretend you killed #23 here. You kids can go home, and Katachi can leave the country and start a new life."

"Hawks-sama, I couldn't possib—"

"I'll cover all the bases, Katachi. You've wanted out for a while, haven't you?"

"Yes, but…"

"Oh, c'mon. I figured out how to fool our surveillance bugs, and you won't let me exercise my powers a little?"

This guy looks like he'll start crying. "Thank you, Hawks-sama! I do not know what I could do to repay you."

Bakugou laughs without humor. "Oi. Oi. Not to ruin your little moment, but don't you think it's fucked that you did all that and now you expect me to trust you and do whatever you ask?"

"Stop playing hard to get, Bakugou. This is a win-win scenario for you. Both of us know you're not blowing anything up. I've been watching and you don't have it in you. At most you'll kill yourself and yourself alone. You even aimed that knife at my shoulder earlier, instead of somewhere it could have actually done damage. I'm genuinely sorry about what happened before, but what the commission will do if we hand you over is going to be a dozen times worse. You wouldn't last in a fight against us either. You already lost once and you've handicapped yourself"

The downward swoop of Bakugou's shoulders tells Fuyumi everything she needs to know, Hawks' right and he's accepted it. It doesn't seem fair to her, if she's honest. He's like a cornered beaten dog being told the beating was for his own good. Through some sort of magic though he scoops up Eri and finds the strength to stand up on shaky legs.

"Want me to hold her for y—"

"Hands fucking off," he says and walks dejected towards the stairs of the platform, blotting his bleeding with his hoodie sleeve. "...What the fuck do you need me to do?"

That night Fuyumi becomes part of a big little secret and learns what it takes to fake a death.

Chapter End Notes

1) i wonder if people are gonna hate hawks lol
2)all of katsuki's threats at the end are bluffs, but he's definitely at the end of the rope due to a) almost losing eri b)koharu dying and c) all the triggering. some of u have been interested in seeing katsuki lose a fight, there you go
3) i seriously made myself sad while writing the worst part of this chapter like for a second there i could not stomach finishing it. i promised less whump too wtf is wrong with me TT
4) this whole thing here was supposed to be only half of this chapter but adding the other half would make it way too long so i opted to split them. one more chapter to go in this arc after all
5) idk what to think of this one i hope it's good lmaooo TT
6) been binging gordon ramsay shows later don't be shocked when i start having bakugou call people donuts as an insult
7) to ppl asking last chapter: katsuki's no footsteps things is just a cool whoo ghost detail complete fantasy nothing concrete or super plot-important about it lol
8) the HPSC is completely fucked in my fic lol. you know how hawks is always under surveillance in canon? i mentioned it in chapter 14 as well during his talk with tsukauchi. this hawks has figured out how to cheat his bugs and basically helps people bail on the HPSC
9) katachi's quirk is supposed to be his body being like clay. he can't change the color (hence all versions of him having brown hair, but he can change shape and consistency. his brown suit works with his quirk because it's make of his hair a la mirio. it's supposed to be a short term quirk (only works for three minutes before body starts to break down) but he's always high on quirk enhancers so... just another throwaway oc lmaoo
10) I'm so mean to katsuki
11) originally the recital was gonna happen at their school but i ended up changing to a theatre for dramatic effect. drama nerds don't come for me a lot of elements of the theatre are fantasy to serve the plot.
12) 200k words eeep
13) i recently binged squid game and the tokyo revengers manga does this explain my sudden urge to write whump 🥵

Chapter 28: Blue

Chapter Summary

Word from the traitor.

(tw for sewing your own sutures)

Chapter Notes

hey.
it's been almost a full month since the last update and I'm deeply sorry. in all honesty, I'm going to blame classes kicking my ass and my own laziness. for a good two weeks i went through a moment of deeply loathing my writing, and couldn't get out more than a couple of words straight. this on top of various trips and events I've had to attend, plus bucket tons of schoolwork, i let myself get sloppy and lose schedule. I'm alright, for anyone who was worried. this chapter isn't really the best, or one I'm even proud of, but i refused to let this story go abandoned, and i felt as though if i didn't finish it now i'd never finish this chapter at all, so here it is in all it's sloppy, exposition riddled glory. with this mini arc done, we'll be finally exacping OC focus prison and getting into the exciting times of buildup payoff endgame.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Okay. Okay,” Katsuki breathes. No blood on the kid’s sheets. That would be no good. Under the moonlight, her face is set in deceptively calm lines, her hair, poorly sprayed a pale wheat yellow, is splayed on the flower-patterned pillow like a halo. No funeral thoughts. She’s fine. Her vitals are fine. She’ll have a peaceful sleep for a day or two and wake up on her own, that’s what #23 told him. She’s fine. She’s alive.

Katsuki feels a tug on his pant leg. He’s shivering, he knows. The world is a bit fuzzy. “Watch her for me, will you?” he says, wishing to bend down and offer Satsu a pet but having none of the energy or clean hands to do so. The furry fucker stops licking at his pant leg, meows once, and toddles his chunky feline ass over to the foot of Eri’s futon. *At least there’s the fucking cat to be trustworthy,* Katsuki thinks.

He already tore the portal they used to get home to shreds. Nobody wants birdie following him home on top of all the bullshit he was put

through today. Katsuki went through the trouble of avoiding their offers of “hospitals” and “first aid” because he’d rather die than go to a HPSC-linked fucking medical facility, and there’s no point in throwing that effort out the window by leaving birdie a freeway to his house. So that portal? And the one Eri used in the theater? Both had a lovely date with Koharu’s paper shredder.

His arm, meanwhile, had its very own lovely date with a knife, curtesy of himself, and he needed to lose even more blood for Hawks’ death faking plan, so that fuzz in his vision? It’s starting to multiply like interference on a shitty TV.

“Bathroom,” he tells himself, moving his iron heavy bones into the hall by sheer force of will. A pitstop in one of the patient rooms, the empty one. The one he stayed in when he first got here. The one whose tatami still has bloodstains from his first suicide attempt. He pricks a pinky on the cactuses of the caddy and doesn’t stop to pay attention. The tools are cold beneath his fingers. It’s the same thing. Over and over. How many times has he been here before? Too many, Katsuki imagines the dead silent house telling him.

Suture kit in hand, he tumbles into the bathroom like a drunk. He wants to laugh. He wants to vomit even though there’s nothing to vomit. It’s been far too long for adrenaline to do anything helpful. The kick is settling into an empty buzz, a catastrophic crash.

The tub’s tiled walls are cold against his feet when he sits down. Peeling off his shirt is about the fourth worst thing he’s ever done. One sleeve is so soaked in blood it’s got a faint neon sheen to it, while the forearm itself is crusted in garish crimson. The gashes are wide, deep, gaping mouths, jagged and uneven and perfectly representative of his current state of being. Globules of yellowish fat gleam through the neon. Not good. The tiles of the tub feel even worse on his back. He reaches for the showerhead, drags it out of its holder, and starts the water. The pressure startles him. Breathe. Breathe. Ignoring how he’s wetting his pants too, he lets water run onto his wound until there’s no more neon coming off it. It burns so much he stops being able to feel it. That is until the water stops running, and all that irritation comes rushing right back.

“Fuck,” he curses, panting as he cleans the edges of the cut with a cloth. Even this mild ass disinfection makes him jerk and hiss. There’s already a fresh wave of blood, thinner than it’s supposed to be courtesy of all the NG, building up. Fuck it. Fuck it. Twenty minutes and it’ll be stitched up and he’ll forget about it. If he gets an infection

he has enough antibiotics in store to fix a goddamn elephant. He'll be fine. Needle. Get the damn needle.

Katsuki's done this about fifty dozen times, practicing. He's lucky enough to have proper sterile supplies and not need to worry about giving sewing strings alcohol baths, but curved needle in hand, accusatory too fucking deep cut in front of him — it's very different from the "realistic" practice blocks of rubber and silicone he's been using to study. There's blood for one, and it smells, and it's his own fucking forearm in his lap he could botch enough to require an amputation. Whatever. Whatever. It's fine. Drop in a bucket. Drop in the ocean. It'll be *easy*.

Sweat, the cold kind, is dripping down his neck in waves, and against his grayed skin the puckered red to brown to shocking white of his too many scars seem to count for him one by one his failures. No thinking. No thinking. Don't look at it. Calm down.

He angles his head against the edge of the tub and bites back a whimper, because fuck does piercing his skin with that needle hurt, especially considering there's little adrenaline rush to help him with the pain. His hand shakes badly — it's hard to feel his fingers. Second suture and he *screams*. It's a short thing, escapes his throat without warning, and quietens just as suddenly, but it leaves him panting and frankly terrified. His murky eyes water and he briefly abandons the needle to get the discarded hoodie behind him and bite into its scrunched-up corner. It's by no means his first time getting stitches, but all of those other times involved either severe disassociation or plain hospital anesthesia. He had someone to help him out. Now he's just got the sound of his own muffled grunts.

They played it so well, birdie and his little goon. Leech bitch's fake death is bound to be on the news tomorrow, and whether the public knows it or not, the HPSC will definitely be informed it was Katsuki. Which means they'll only double down on looking for him, and this time with even stronger justification. Which means he has to rely on birdie and maintain rapport if he wants to keep them off his trail. Those two reduced him to this, and somehow *he's* still the one who owes *them*. It's a manipulation masterclass. A damn work of art is what it is.

And they wouldn't be here if Katsuki were strong and smart enough. Had he used his brain and stayed the fuck home, things may have gone differently. Had he had the power to keep himself and the kid safe when push came to shove, they wouldn't be here. Instead, he is

here, hanging by loose threads to a dozen people, getting sloppy with his disguises, offering up too much of himself too early, childishly trusting and naive.

What is he supposed to do, when he keeps fucking up and every path takes him back to square one? Why does he feel like ownership of his own life is slipping from his fingers with every passing week? What power does he have? What leverage does he have? If Kirishima spilled the beans on his location right now, what would he be able to do against a platoon of heroes with quirks when his hand to hand is subpar and his other power burns through his lifespan faster than a roaring hot flame burns through a single pathetic sheet of paper? If Hawks opted to turn him in tomorrow, what would he be able to do against a crowd of #23 power level goons but roll over and panic attack into next Saturday? How would he be able to keep the kid safe when he can't even talk to her about heroes without his heart jumping to his throat?

With a creased brow, he ties off the last knot, spits out the hoodie, and exhales hard. Okay. That should be good. Now he needs to get out of the tub and dry himself off and wrap the wound up before he catches a cold. *Push yourself up,* he thinks, and doesn't even twitch. His face is wet. With the immediate danger gone, his body seems to have given up and turned to stone. How nice. How amazing. How fucking pathetic. He tries again, moves up a few centimeters, only to collapse right back down and splash the small amounts of water that haven't made it down the drain yet. Katsuki should get up. He knows. And he will get up. Right after a little breather. He allows his head to rest against the tub's edge and closes his eyes. Just a little. He'll close his eyes for a little.

They don't open again for hours.

Someone is slapping his face when he wakes up. Not slapping per se, rather tapping. This someone's skin is soft and well taken care of, their nails are manicured, Katsuki's brain immediately screams to him mom and he startles so hard he almost gives himself a concussion.

It's not the hag, of course, it isn't. It's blue niece.

"What are you doing?" she asks, having retracted her hand in favor of staring at it then him in varying shades of disappointment.

"You've got some nerve," Katsuki says, apprehensive but too cold and

tired and fucking hell how long has he been sitting here to act on it. “If you touched Eri you’re dead.”

“I didn’t.”

“I should trust you, why?”

“I mean it.”

“Yeah? Cuz you got a good track record in that department don’t you?” He begins to hoist himself up on agonized arms.

“I promise I mean– what is that?!” She makes to grab Katsuki’s sutured arm and he flinches, collapsing back into the tub. “What is that?!”

“Accident. Stupid.”

Her eyes fall on the discarded suture kits and crumpled latex gloves adorning the floor, the leftover spots of blood on the wall of the tub.

“You did your own stitches.”

“Great deduction, Sherlock.”

Blue niece swallows. Katsuki’s own mouth is dry.

“You should have called.”

He purses his lips, and how fast her thought is discarded and the topic changed is proof enough that she gets it.

“They’re neat. For…” sutures you do on yourself on the verge of death. “That looks,” grotesque, disgusting, shit, “bad.”

“Mhm.”

“You must’ve lost a lot of blood. You look like a sack of flour.”

“Mhm.” Now that he thinks about it… He holds up two fingers to the juncture of his neck and relaxes a bit when he feels the faint thrum of a pulse. No defibrillators today. Aoi follows his movements as if magnetized.

“What are you doing?”

“Checking to see I’m not dead,” he responds flatly.

"…Right…Did you– did you try to kill yourself?!" The question is quiet, a mild inflection of denial.

"No, this happened yesterday, during that kidnapping attempt, you know, the one you've been trying to set up for weeks–" A jerk, a stuttered breath– Katsuki knows he's right.

"They did *that*?!"

"*I* did that."

"Why?"

"Because– does it matter? None of it would have happened if you'd bothered to keep your big mouth shut anyway. Helpful private source my ass." Katsuki needs to be more alert, he shouldn't be playing this so nonchalantly, but damn it all to fuck he *can't* anymore.

"I'm sorry–"

"Keep it. You can apologize circles around the globe if you want. What I wanna know is why." He sighs. He needs a change of clothes asap. "Fuck me I guess, but the kid is six. Those HPSC fucks would ruin her fifty times more than I could. You hate us that much?"

She can't meet his gaze. "I don't."

Katsuki arches a brow.

"I don't hate you!" she repeats, firmer.

"You're giving mixed signals. You are the mole, ain't ya? Or you got some other explanation as to who this source who knows my daily routine and phone number is? You write it all down in a diary and conveniently lose it or some shit? Write to your pen pal about it?"

"No," she chokes out.

"So it's you, ain't it."

"Y-yes."

"And you expect me to believe you don't hate us?" he says incredulously.

"I warned you."

“Three lines, supremely helpful. You still haven’t answered my question.”

“It’s a long story.”

“I got time.”

“You look like you’re about to pass out.”

“I got time,” he repeats.

“You need a blood transfusion at least. Or water. or food.” None of those sound half bad but Katsuki is not taking shit from a damned snitch. He huffs and stubbornly settles more into the uncomfortable bathtub.

“The faster you spit out your answer the faster we can get to that.”

Her face is conflicted, a messy mix of emotions and crinkles. Her golden eyes dart from the wound to Katsuki’s face to the bathtub to the abandoned medical supplies on the floor. Katsuki stares at her the whole time. Two minutes later, her shoulders seem to swoop in defeat.

“…I was six when I first met auntie—“

“Hah?”

“Just listen, okay?”

Her bedroom light is off. Mom tucked her in a whole hour ago. But Aoi can’t sleep, and Kon’s snoring isn’t to blame tonight. She can hear shuffling and voices through the thin walls of their house, voices she doesn’t recognize.

“I begged you… for this long and you…” says the muffled voice of her gramps.

“Save it, Haruki…” replies a voice she’s never heard before, one belonging to a woman. “—twice and here I am.”

“Two times too many.”

“Oh shut up. How are the children, Mizuho? Sorairo… hates me… I assume.” Dad hates this lady? Who even is she?”

“No… no,” comes grandma’s muffled voice. “…see…tomorrow… good kids…”

She hears her mother’s footsteps exit the room next door and she knows she’ll be in trouble if mom finds her awake, so she covers herself up completely and shuts her eyes tight enough to hurt until she falls asleep.

The next morning, there’s a new chair at the breakfast table, and said new chair is occupied by a short lady with messily tied gold-grey hair and the brightest golden eyes Aoi has ever seen.

“They’re brighter than great granny’s,” she blurts out before she can help it.

“Oh, dear. That old hag better not hear you say that,” the mystery lady responds, a melodic tone to her voice.

Dad chooses that moment to pass through the door.

"Paws off my kid," he says, huffing.

"She doesn't look like you at all," mystery lady quips.

Aoi's been told that before, but it's never made dad this mad before.

"Only thing she's got is your hair color, and even then, it isn't all limp like yours."

"Very mature," dad responds flatly. "Father, why would you even have her visit?"

"I'd love to know too."

"We haven't seen her in years--" says gramps, sipping that one tea that smells like sewage but is apparently good for digestion.

"Who's fault is that, exactly?"

"--Who will she spend Christmas with?"

"We don't even celebrate Christmas!" Gramps pretends not to hear, leaving mystery lady to awkwardly chew on her breakfast bun while dad glares from his chair. She winks at Aoi and it’s so out of nowhere Aoi can feel the flush down to her toes.

Later, when Aoi is helping mom put away the dishes, she tugs at her pants and asks, "Who's that lady?"

"Didn't they tell you?"

"No."

Mom sighs and wipes her hands with a table cloth.

"That's gramps' older sister. Your great aunt Koharu."

"She's related to us?" It's a useless question. Aoi could tell the moment she saw those eyes.

"Mhm."

"Why isn't she at great granny's birthdays?" Everyone is at great granny's birthdays, even the most obscure of cousins. "Why does dad hate her?"

"Answered your own question honey. She's a total stranger. Won't show anywhere. I know how they treated her way back wasn't the best, but ten years is taking it too far, I think."

"Ten years of what, mama? I don't get it."

"Forget it, Ao-chan. Haven't you got piano lessons in half an hour? Go get ready for that."

She has got piano lessons, and soccer club, and math classes, and an exam in caligraphy. Their nanny drives her from class to class, she watches the golden trees of the Hiryo compound disappear and reappear through the rolled-up windows of the car. Mom is fussing over the twins when she gets home, and Aoi's success in today's quizzes is fast overshadowed by one of the twins growing an entire tree out of a single droplet of finger-prick-produced blood. Another strong quirk. More competition. She's not supposed to see it that way, but it's the truth anyway.

Why?

Blood beads on her own pale skin, and the drop marbles the water beautifully when it breaks the surface. She's wasted an entire pack of paper cups, all of them soaked various shades of pink, scattered on the floor, their contents murky or spilled.

Great aunt Koharu materializes in the doorway. It might be the blood loss, but she seems to be glowing. Aoi's eyes refocus on her, pupils dilating.

"You're Aoi?" She nods. "What are you working on?"

"My quirk."

"You have it already?" Her impressed tone makes something warm bloom in Aoi's chest; drowns out the constant feeling of discontentedness.

"Yeah. I make water into healing serum with my blood."

She hums pensively. "Healing serum, huh. Lucky you."

Lucky? It's by far the weakest of the quirks on their side of the family, and only eight or so in line compared to the quirks of the rest of her generation of extended cousins. "No… s'bad," she mumbles, words coming out slurred by accident. It really does look weird, the world. The floor is all floaty too, and Aoi's skin is fifty percent goosebumps.

"Not as good as Kon-nii-san's…" He always uses that argument. My quirk is better so I'm better. It annoys her to no end. "That's why mom and dad like him more."

Her field of vision tilts, and before she knows it great aunt Koharu is propping up her head.

"You've worked too hard, honey." Something in her tone betrays unhappiness, but it isn't at Aoi.

"M'fine," she continues to slur, even as her body betrays her and curls further into Great Auntie's touch. The woman produces a candy and makes Aoi eat it. The sugar coats her mouth with the flavor of caramel and clears her vision if only a little.

"Figures they're still hung up on that mentality."

"Need good quirk. Gotta be… good enough."

There's a hand on her forehead, she's being shushed. "Aoi-chan... I don't have a healing quirk at all."

Vision clearing further, it seems to hyperfocus on Great Aunt Koharu's face, her wrinkles and wisps of hair, and kind set creases of the skin. "Ehh? But your eyes."

She smiles. "I look like I should, don't I? But I don't. I got called useless a lot growing up." A tap on her temple. The touch is electric, buzzing. "If you got a good one up here though, and you work hard, they'll all be chasing after you in twenty years' time. I mean, look at me. I was the family reject and now they're begging to have me back. "

"She spent so much of that entire week giving me tips on improving my quirk and helping me with one lesson or another. Growing up with three brothers who had stronger quirks, I'd get overlooked a lot, so getting that kind of attention, I guess I felt seen for the first time," she explains.

Katsuki stays quiet. He's not much interested in blue niece's life story and their fucked up family dynamics but the insight into Healer Hag might just make it worth it.

"It was special to me. I don't think she saw it the same way…" says Aoi. "Anyway, after that week she went and disappeared again for another five years or something. I got kind of obsessed. You know how little kids get hung up on All Might?" Of course, he knows. He *was* that kid.

"My All Might was auntie. I'd sneak around gramps' study and the big house trying to find family pictures she was in, and later when I learned to use the Internet I'd look her up constantly. And here she was doing all this research... I thought she was so cool. I'd wish to see her again every time we got the chance to pray. She did show up when I was eleven, but it was because she'd ended up in gramps' hospital. Same issue as… you know. After that, I don't know what changed but she started coming to family gatherings more."

"Do you gotta be this long-winded—?"

"Why? Are you dying?" The genuine worry in her voice is disgusting.

He is, dying that is. Of an infection probably. But it's in the same way everyone is dying, i.e. very slowly. So he says, "Nope," because what if the bitch decides to force him to the hospital?

"Oh thank god. So, she started coming to family gatherings, but our little spark wasn't there anymore. I didn't feel special to her anymore. Auntie would praise me and and encourage me—but it felt kind of shallow."

“Why is she like that?” Aoi asks, when she’s thirteen and they’re driving back to their house from this year’s gathering in their eight-person van.

“Who?” mom responds absent-mindedly.

“Auntie Koharu.”

“Ah.” It’s as if everyone in the car has a common understanding of the “that” she’s referring to.

“Old bat is hung up on ancient history—“

“Sorairo,” mom scolds.

“What, honey. We’re all thinking it.”

“The worst of it happened before you even existed. You wouldn’t know,” gramps cuts in.

“That’s my point! It’s been years. You think she’d be over it by now.”

“Mother certainly isn’t.”

Dad scoffs. “She’s slower than a sloth, and she can’t even unscrew jars on her own anymore. What’s there to be scared of?” His sentence tapers off at the end as if he seems to have realized the flaw of his reasoning but doesn’t want to take it back.

“It only looks that way to you because you’re her firstborn grandchild. She’s always spoiled you, Sorairo.”

“I seem to remember the guy who had the worst fights with Koharu was you, father.”

Aoi holds her breath, and even the usually rowdy twins have quit their bickering to listen in interest.

“That’s true,” grandpa concedes, “But I was a coddled and stubborn fool growing up. I never realized how hard she had it.”

“How hard did she have it?” Katsuki asks.

“Well, you know how her surname was Iki?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s her dad’s surname.”

“And? Ain’t that shit normal?”

“Not for Hiryos no. Any kid with one Hiryo parent gets the surname Hiryo, be that parent their mom or dad. And the law says couples have to stick to a single surname, so that surname is always Hiryo. That means auntie’s dad took his wife’s name— the great granny I keep mentioning. She’s been dead for a bit.”

“Kind of hardcore with your pureblood bullshit, aren’t you?”

“It’s because Hiryo genes are strong. Like defying genetics strong. You’re guaranteed to have the golden eyes one and some type of healing quirk two. Surnames are a good way to keep track of everyone.”

“Healer hag didn’t have a healing quirk though.”

“That’s what makes her the black sheep of the family. I think something like that has only happened three or four times in total, and the first was her. On top of her lung condition, she was basically seen as a defect.”

“Damn.”

“Giving up the surname was representative of that, as the clan’s worst taboo.”

“And so what? She’ll hold the grudge forever?”

“I don’t know what she plans to do, but frankly, she’s entitled to it.”

“You’re not answering my question,” Aoi musters up the courage to say.

“You mean why is she like an addictive drug?” fills in grandma.

“Well…”

“She sucks you into her orbit, right?” Aoi nods. “She’s charismatic like that. Makes you feel like you want to impress her.”

“It’s true…” mom mumbles.

“Makes you feel like you’d be on top of the world if she cared about

you. But no matter how hard you try… you can never get her to genuinely care."

"Right," Aoi says, feeling seen, glad that she's not the only one with this obsession.

"Sorairo had that happen to him too," grandma recalls fondly, bearing no mind to dad's vehement and futile denials.

"That woman gets you obsessed and gives crumbs back."

Katsuki always thought healer hag was cool, but never to *that* degree.

"Fucking creeps."

"You never noticed it because you always had her attention."

"Whatever makes you sleep at night."

"Really, I think we all envied how free she was. The clan has all these rigid structures and etiquette norms and expectations. I didn't feel it as much at home, but whenever I have to talk to the rest of the family, it gets unbearable. Don't do this, only do that, what's that one great uncle going to think of us, and on the other side of that, you had this woman who'd show up like a storm whenever she wanted and did whatever she wanted without having to answer to anyone. We craved that."

Katsuki will never understand the point of putting all this effort into building this big ass clan, hell, empire, only to force its members to conform to bullshit anyway.

Maintenance and keeping order and all that, he supposes. He isn't a fan. Maybe having raised himself has something to do with it.

"But why?"

"It's because Ko has horrible social skills," says grandpa.

"That's such a lame explanation," says one of the twins.

"But it's the truth. Growing up we were always inside because quirk users were still getting lynched and hunted so she could only interact with the family that either ignored or bullied her. She has no idea what an interest-free relationship looks like. She blows through

friendship like party firecrackers because she gets distracted by work."

Dad groans. "Her goddamn work and her goddamn sun shop."

"She'll be on her deathbed wondering who's going to pick up her next shipment of medicinal herbs. It was a spite thing at first but now she's married to that shop," grandpa continues. It's the first time Aoi has heard of this Sun Shop.

"The only way to trap that woman is to become her business partner." Grandma laughs.

"They were laughing about it. But I took it serious. I thought If I can be her assistant, she'll have no choice but to pay attention."

Katsuki has a feeling she knows where this is going.

"I even told her, right," Her voice wobbles. "You're going to hire me one day. And you know, she said, I will when you're old enough. I was sixteen. She pulled a disappearing act for the next seven years and I could never get the chance to talk to her for long those two or three times she did show up. I'd visit at the shop all the time after I managed something, good grades, uni acceptance letters… hoping she'd remember. She didn't, so I stopped and thought I'm going to need to do something really amazing, right. Finished my bachelor's degree and went straight to master's for quirk research. I do this, she'll have no choice but to hire me, I'm thinking. Then, I hear these rumors, that she did get herself an assistant. And it wasn't me. I thought, that promise was one-sided too, wasn't it?"

Healer hag didn't promise shit, technically. But whatever, he's not gonna interrupt the monologue. He's surprised blue niece hasn't started crying.

"We stumbled upon each other at the quirk conference and here she was, with that same magnetism. This auntie was nicer, mellower, something about her felt different, but as we talked about the assistant situation I could tell she'd completely forgotten all about me and what I asked her way back. Then she takes me out to coffee, and lo and behold, she wants to get a check-up. Because she's sicker than she's been in years and increased stress levels are a huge reason for the relapse."

That conference was months ago. It was before he even got kidnapped the second time. A familiar chisel of guilt chips at him. She was

stressed since back then?

“I don't understand.”

The medical report typed in neat, serif font utterly uncaring of the severity of what it’s announcing, crinkles in her hands. Auntie doesn’t even bother to look at it properly. Does she care so little?

“You’ve got an assistant, you’ve been moving the shop less, shouldn’t you be doing better?” Aoi asks, trying her best to keep her voice level and not betray any disappointment.

“My assistant is quite the handful.”

Her grip twitches. “Then they’re not an assistant.”

Figures it would take some world-bending outsider to capture her attention. All those years of trying and for what? Here auntie is, plucking magic strays from the streets and acting blind towards the rest of them. There was never any hope at all, was there?

“Please,” the old woman says dismissively, the ghost of a smile on her face. How can a person be so frustrating?

“No, *please*. Auntie, you’re really sick.”

“I’m always really sick.” Is she a child? “A few higher dosages will do me good. It’s the four-year illness cycle. Couple of months and it’ll die down.”

Aoi hopes for both their sakes that’s true.

“So I get hung up on you next. I research everything. Find contacts in the hero commission. Try to ask gramps who fixed you that first time and get the old geezer miming zipped lips at me. I’m frustrated. I don’t get it. Then, a couple of weeks later, she calls.”

Auntie informs her the bright lettering of her phone app. Aoi’s heart skips a beat, the delusional thought that this is it bouncing back and forth in her head the way it does everytime auntie calls.

“Where are you?” she asks and sounds so alarmed Aoi’s previous hopeful mood goes down the drain. Gramps said she’d come over for another check-up and it was not good. What if something happened to

her? But her voice doesn't sound hurt.

"The hospital—"

"Haruki's?"

"Yes, why—"

"There's a pocket entrance to the shop in the unused laundry room on the second floor of the west wing. Could you hop over please?" She asks no questions, just takes the quickest route to the west wings and ends up moving two washing machines by sheer force of will to get access to the well-hidden pocket entrance. There's little chance to enjoy the fact that she's been invited over through one of auntie's family famous pocket portals before she's got an eyeful of… dead kid.

No really. There's a corpse of a kid on the floor covered in diluted blood and littered with weird marks and scars. At once, she can hear her heartbeat rush in her ears, feel the flush of panic. Is this auntie's famed assistant?!

"Why is your assistant thirteen and why does he look like he's survived a zombie apocalypse?!" she asks, drawing closer to help auntie haul him into a stretcher and take him *somewhere*. He's not breathing, that much is obvious. Oh heck. She might have a one-sided grudge with this guy, but she doesn't want him *dead*.

"I'm pretty sure he's dead, auntie."

"I know that—" What? What, *what*?!

"Why didn't you call sooner?!"

"I was busy with the other one."

"There's another one?!" Oh god, there's another one.

"Seems so— you're young, put your back into it." She would if they weren't hauling a corpse. He looks *so* dead.

"How long has he been like this—"

"I'd say two hours—"

What the actual fuck?! "Two fricking hours?! There's no way he's not brain dead."

“It’s happened before and he was resuscitated fine,” auntie says, the tone of her voice snappish, as if Aoi’s the one in the wrong for assuming that someone who hasn’t been breathing for two hours is long past resuscitation. This guy can come back from the dead?! Is that what it takes to get auntie’s attention? This isn’t a thriller movie.

“It’s happened before?! Where did you even find him?! How did this even happen?! Did you pick him off the streets, auntie?!” No wonder she’s been so stressed. Look at the state of him!

“Pretty much.”

“She tells me who you are. And of course, I know you. You were all over the news. First, it’s shock. Then I’m sympathetic, I mean, I picked you up when you were dead on the floor.”

Katsuki winces, very much not in the mood to recall what it felt like to walk around with a bullet in his leg. “Stop — stop talking about it like that. I get it. I was dead. Move the fuck on.”

“Right. Sorry.” She inhales. “But the more you refuse to heal, and the worse auntie’s state gets, the more I’m starting to resent you. I forget the state I found you in. I black it out in my memory even. I’m thinking, I got beat out by this quirkist PR black hole of a child? It doesn’t make sense to me. All those media clips of you reminded me of the spoiled, prejudiced family members I used to hate, and the current you seemed like a guy taking advantage of his bad situation to take advantage of auntie. I couldn’t stand it.”

There’s an ugly tangle in his throat. “So you started feeding shit about me to the commission.”

“Yeah,” she admits. “I thought I’d get you off her hands myself. I had my contacts from when I did research on you and auntie asked me to muddy rumors the first time. I’d make it seem like an accident, give it a couple of months, and auntie would forget like she always did everyone, mission success.”

“You’re a piece of shit.”

“I know. At the time though, when I found her passed out and you were off buying clothes or whatever, I’d never felt so validated. But I was scared too. Her lungs were messed up so bad. I was sure she’d die. I got tunnel vision, tore into you”

“Can’t she see looking after that kid is killing her?!” Aoi says, her voice not exactly room appropriate in volume. The floor-to-ceiling windows of the central office let in burning squares of twilight, the sleepy city unfurls beyond them. Someone will inherit this office someday, and Aoi was made abundantly aware, since the moment her quirk came in, that it would never be her. “She’s going to– what are we supposed to do, gramps? How can you get rid of stressors when she lives with a factory of them?”

“Koharu lives with *children*, Aoi,” her grandfather interrupts, rolling his office chair forward and wringing out kinks in his wrinkled fingers. “You’d do well to remember that before you choose how to speak with them.”

“But it’s a fact, isn’t it? That they stress her out, and that’s the opposite of what she needs.”

He doesn’t offer a reply. Only shuffles through the papers on his desk and lets her seep in the silence of her own anger and fear.

“C’mon, gramps. You don’t want to admit it but you know it’s true.”

A beat.

“There’s nothing you can do about it,” he says finally, the faint agreement sending a rush of validation through Aoi. Is he on her side? Is he on her side for once in her life?

“Isn’t there? Can’t we leave a tip to the authorities?" What she doesn't say is that she's *been* doing this. She decided since last week. The burner phone in her purse is the damning proof of it. And if gramps agrees, is she really in the wrong? “–send them to an orphanage? There are plenty of families who’d love to take in a little girl, she’s young enough that she won’t remember, and the boy is old enough to be sent to a boarding school, or anywhere not here.”

“You’ll be doing no such thing. Koharu cares for them.”

And that care will be for naught if she dies.

“They’re her *project*. She’s decided to play grandma for the wrong people. What do they even have to offer her anyway–?”

“Aoi,” gramps hisses, a flash glinting in his eyes, lips tightening. “You are far too young to be this cynical. Human relationships are no plain matter of offers and returns.” Is that so? Because the Hiryo clan has

taught her differently. *He's* taught her differently. He's also taught her to pick her battles though, so she bites her tongue and keeps her mouth shut on the hypocrisy.

"So we just sit and watch her die?"

"Yes, if that's what she wants. She's older than me, kid. She's more than enough adult. Her choices are her own." He picks up a marbled blue envelope, the one Kon's fancy ass always sends his pretentious letters in. She feels fifteen all over again, cramped at the edge of the table full of dozens of other, *better*, golden-eyed kids. Why won't they listen to her? Why do their eyes look her over, as if she's not there, as if her worries are the buzz of a minuscule fly?

Knowing full well this discussion will end fruitless, she stands from her chair and stops herself from slamming the door shut as she leaves.

This thought process is rotting Katsuki's brain. Was he this bad too, once upon a time? Was he worse? Is he *still* this bad?

"People tried to warn me, but I only got deeper into my own hole of delusion. I got defensive. I thought they were all wrong and out to get me. What I was doing was reasonable. Eri could use more qualified people to care for her, and I knew from reports from your parents and old teachers that you wouldn't end up anywhere bad if the public found out you were still alive. Everyone would be groveling at your feet for forgiveness, if anything, after what they threw you into."

Looking at him with pity, she means.

"But I couldn't be straightforward with revealing it, because auntie was always at risk. There couldn't be an association between you and her. There couldn't be anything linking you back to the shop that whoever I told about you could exploit. So I was careful with what I told and who I told it to. I'd only give your location when I knew you were nowhere near the shop. I'd purposefully keep more damning details obscured. It was exhausting. And I was only talking with the HPSC, who I knew would be discreet enough to keep your discovery under wraps. Make you disappear quietly."

You will not come quietly? He shivers.

"Koharu hated those fuckers."

"I know."

“Because they’ll wash out your whole personality.”

“…Yeah.”

“What happened to 'knowing nothing bad would happen to me', then? Stopped caring about that real quick, huh? You knew who you were working with and you didn’t care.”

“I was desperate,” she admits, gazing at the pink-tinted flooring. “Auntie was getting worse and worse, I was in too deep with the Commission to quit when I started regretting it, I figured you’d find a way out. I’d seen you do it before. You could make one more sacrifice for auntie’s sake.”

One more sacrifice…

“And Eri?”

“I made the agent I was talking to promise she’d get sent to a foster home.”

“Did they?”

A nod.

“D’you believe them?”

“…N-no,” it gets caught in her throat, suffocates in thin air.

“Fuck you,” Katsuki says.

Her lip trembles. The audacity on this bitch. “I ended up leaking the recital date and time the weekend before auntie died, then I talked to her the morning before *it* happened and–”

“You’ll take care of Katsuki, won’t you?” auntie says, the strain of speaking rocking her frail body. Even at a time like this, she’s… Aoi can’t find it in herself to be angry. The exhaustion in Katsuki’s everything and the flailing, delusional hope in his eyes is getting harder to ignore day by day. Surrounded by knit projects and film pictures and drawings over drawings pasted on the walls, surrounded by products of… love, it’s not the time for grudges. With the way things are looking, her efforts will be futile anyway.

“What about you?” she deflects, unable to swallow the bubble of guilt on her tongue. Auntie has no idea.

“Silly girl,” the old woman says, because she’s dying and they both know it. “I’ve not been the best to you–” speaking strains her but she perseveres. “I’ve not been there enough for you and your siblings and your cousins. I let bitterness get the best of me. Having those two around… has made me realize how much love I’ve been missing out on.”

“Auntie–”

“Thank you, Aoi-chan. You’ve helped me out a lot... and you’ve got a bright future. Make a little room in there for those kids, alright? They’ve got no one else.”

She’s leaving Aoi a dying wish, and it’s one she’s already trampled on. Her heart twists in the bad way.

“They’re young, they’ve been through a lot–” a coughing fit. Aoi rushes up and helps Koharu sit in a more comfortable position.

“It’s okay. I get it. You don’t have to talk.” Those words taste bitter.

“Thank you.”

Katsuki’s eyes aren’t watering, nope. Fuck this. Fuck his life. Damn Healer Hag and her stupid terminal illness.

“She died the next day. Everything I was doing felt worthless after that. I mean, her will left you ninety percent of her estate and she was so careful with the planning… You were never a project. My resentment was quelled enough to admit it. That’s why I sent you the warning text. Because I hated myself for what I’d done.”

“Fat load of good that did–”

She stands, startling him.

“What are you–”

Blue niece proceeds to take a few steps back and fucking kneel. As in hands and knees, forehead kissing the fucking floor. His jaw hinges open, feeling deeply uncomfortable at the vulnerable gesture.

“Katsuki-kun, I’m sorry,” she says. “I was blinded by my own jealousy and took my frustrations out on you more times than you ever deserved. I betrayed your trust and knowingly put you in a situation that would end horribly for you and Eri-chan. I took advantage of the

fact that you had no one else to turn to and–"

"Get the fuck up, what the fuck–"

"And It wasn't right, and you didn't deserve it. I'm sorry for blaming you for getting kidnapped, and for saying it was your fault you being a target caused auntie stress, and I'm–"

"Please get the fuck up," he says, and the rare politeness makes her snap out of her stupor. The line of her shoulders trembles. Katsuki doesn't deserve a bow like that. he's not– he was a stressor– he did catalyze Healer Hag's condition– no one owes him care and– "Look, it's fine. Get up." She sits a little straighter but doesn't stand. "I get it, okay. I'm–"

"I'll make it up to you," she blurts out. "I get it if you never want to see my face again, but I'll help you out with whatever you need if you do ask for it. Whether it's running the shop or avoiding our stupid family members or navigating the university… *Whatever you need*."

His jaw clicks. It would be so dumb, to trust her again so soon. Yet, she seems genuinely apologetic, overly so if anything. And Katsuki does need allies. He's got no one else. He's stuck. Lose her and it might come back to kick his ass a few years (or months) down the line. The bathroom is silent for a long time.

"You messed up big," he says after a while. Aoi only nods. "And I ain't gonna trust you the way I did anytime soon, but–" Her stance loosens. "–I ain't gonna close your door either."

"Thank you!" she exclaims, still sitting on the messy floor. "I promise you won't regret it–"

"Yeah, yeah." He sighs. "Now get me a blood transfusion and antibiotics before I die."

She pales. "What's your blood type?"

"There's bags of my own in the fridge." He needs it for tests and experiments. It's not weird. Probably.

"...Right."

Chapter End Notes

1. idk how well this was set up honestly. i tried to leave clues but

yeah
2. some of you guessed aoi was jealous the moment she had her outburst. ten points to your respective hogwarts house lmfao
3. i wanted to include more scenes and deepen the lore but i have no energy.
4. this has so much exposition it makes me want to kms lmfao
5. hiryo clan people: haruki is koharu's little brother, as we know. aoi is the niece. aoi has an older brother called Kon (紺) meaning dark blue and two younger twin siblings i won't burden you with the names of. her dad is Sorairo (空色 sky blue color) and her mom is unnamed. They're purposefully named after shades of blue. her grandmother (as in Haruki's spouse) is named Mizuho. i wanted to include scenes od koharu growing up too so you could actually get a better feel for the backstory, but it didn't fit.
6. i doubt anyone is much interested in this OC stuff anyway
7. very curious to know on whether aoi's story makes sense and what people will think of her now.
8) btw, aoi's plan was very much reckless and the only reason it didn't get all of them swiftly busted was hawks on the other end purposefully making sure katsuki wouldn't be caught. it's not supposed to be a particularly smart plan
9. god my brain does not work i am so sorry TT
10. i read priory of the orange tree recently and would like to kiss it as a book

Chapter 29: Interlude No.1 : Mr.Crusty and How Repeated Kidnapping Builds a Mythos

Chapter Summary

> Dabi's lounging around and Katsuki is finally looking through that file of information Noriko compiled for him.

Chapter Notes

> I am sooo sorry for disappearing for months. I hit a total blockade, and school has been absolutely kicking my ass. Winter break started yesterday and I've been meaning to write something for ages, so here's a little Christmas Eve chapter. This story has come so far and I do not wanna abandon it four chapters away from the big one everyone has been waiting for. warning that there's a bit of graphic description from dabi's past in the chappie, and dabi's thoughts are... ehem... crude and very villainy. I hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Who'd have thought he'd go from dingy alleyways to leather couches in the span of two years?

Not Dabi, that's for sure. It was a real stroke of luck, joining the League when he did. If there's one thing almost getting your operation busted multiple times will do for you, it's building team spirit. These fucks trust him. They've got their friendship is magic, but make it evil, schtick all figured out. Now they have an army of meta liberation morons, too, and a good quarter of them will go as far as to bark for him if it means they'll get in the good graces of the "higher-ups". One of whom happens to be Dabi. It's fucking glorious.

He crunches up his canned coffee and easily shoots it into the trash can at the foot of the wooden wardrobe. The shit in here's so shiny and nice smelling it's bound to be more expensive than five of Dabi put together.

"Not that anyone would be willing to spend a penny on you now," pipes up a voice from the opposite couch. "Don't talk about yourself like that man," immediately contradicts another.

"You give me migraines," Dabi says, eyes narrowing at his comrade's

(?) unmasked, blond-haired face before snapping away, back to the painted framing of the ceiling. “And your forehead looks like two butt cheeks sewn together. Put a damn headband on that shit.”

“Rich of you to say that,” replies another Twice, one who’s entered the room through the elaborately bedazzled door. The two Twices share a fist pump and the newcomer makes himself comfortable on the leg of the couch. Ever since Deika, Twice has been cloning himself at least four or five times a day. While Dabi appreciates the additional manpower, he does not appreciate having a million alien spidermans flooding out of every other closet and bathroom, and kitchen of this massive house.

With the tip of his finger, he cleans out a film of wax from his ear. “Sorry, were you talking?”

“Jerk,” The two say simultaneously.

Dabi hooks his leg over the couch’s back cushions and stares at his finger, at the stretched-out skin of his palm and the straining staples keeping it attached to the rest of the hand. It stings, so it’s easy to find the spot where the grafts have come lose a millimeter or so and started to bleed. Shit, he thinks. It’s been happening more and more as of late. With the doctor offline and god knows where, Dabi’s had no one to super heal his skin treatment, and if he doesn’t get someone soon, the whole damn thing will start to flake off.

The Doctor going offline has really hurt all of them, in one way or the other. Dabi knows it had to be done because the heroes knew, and the Doc knew that the heroes knew, and that man is not man enough to try and face them. He left his lab and supplies ad instructions to get Gigantomachia on their side, but took himself and his brain and his quirks off the map. It just so happens that his brain and his quirks are what Dabi needs, what he’s relied on for the last decade and has to rely on now. Healing quirks are hard to come by, much less the specific one the Doc uses the keep Dabi in one piece.

He’s cold. There are burns everywhere and his skin is on fire and it feels like his tears are combusting into flame, but all Touya feels is cold. Blue, sapphire, and midnight and electric all at once, blue so bright and blinding it’s difficult to look at, roars and incinerates trees leaf by leaf. He runs, clothes flaking off and shoes destroyed, there’s nothing he can do but run. He needs to show dad. To show Endeavor. That he can. He can be a star instead of a plain light bulb, he can be the one to topple All Might. Dad needs to know, that Touya’s flames burn so bright, nothing will get in their

way.

But no matter where he steps and stumbles, how many leaves his toes turn to ash and how much the grittiness of dirt tears at his inflamed soles, the blue follows him everywhere, and the compound of the estate is nowhere to be seen. He takes a turn, thinks he remembers it being this way but can't really be sure. The forest howls with flames, crackles, and ash fill his ears. Touya coughs, inhales a lungful of soot, and coughs again, tasting iron in his mouth. An animal must've been caught in the carnage, he thinks, because the smell of burning flesh is strong enough to drown out that of smoke. Whatever his hands look like beneath the veil of flame, they feel like they're being scorched alive. Water lights on fire as it drips down his face, and all the heat is making his field of vision wobble.

Look at me, he wants to scream. Look at how amazing I can be, how much I can do. But there's no one there to look, regardless of how Touya twists and turns. Because Natsu is long asleep, and mom and nee-san don't matter, and dad is with Shouto. Perfect little Shouto and his perfect little split hair, wasting away in the training room and being a pussy about the job meant for Touya. Shouto's mental constitution is weak, and he cries all the time, and dad scolds him three times as much as he scolded Touya, yet somehow, he's still better. He's still the one getting the training Touya was made for, living the dream Touya has begged to have back.

Damn it all. Where is Endeavor? Maybe if Touya gives him a nice hug, the man will realize the power of the fire he's been missing out on. Knees buckling, he holds on to a tree trunk for support only to yank his hand away as the whole thing bursts into flame on contact. With nothing to hold him up, his legs give in.

Look at me. Look at me. "Fucking look!" he screams hoarsely, bringing his hand to his face. Something gooey makes contact with the fingers, and he realizes his face is melting off. Oh wow. Is this enough for dad? Shouto could never hope to light something this strong he could never—

"Fuck." Because it fucking hurts and Endeavor's not here to see it. His heart may as well leap out of his chest at the speed it's going. He heaves a breath of polluted air, and it's so fucking hot his nostrils burn. The Doctor told him he could make his flames blue with enough effort, enough of an emotional discharge. But turning them off never came in the instructions. Dad has to— Touya will—

"Fuck."

At this rate, he'll fucking cremate himself.

When he woke up after that, the Doc was there. It'd been weeks. Touya died and Dabi was born. Doc explained he was proud of Dabi for going through with his suggestion, and happened to be passing by when he saw the fire and knew it could only have one source. At thirteen, Touya had been too dumb and rage blinded to question it, at twenty-three he knows the excuse is bullshit and willingly rolls with it. Whatever crap the Doc was there for that night, he'd saved Dabi's life and offered a literal chance at rebirth. Then he'd shoved Dabi in the streets to fend for himself for the next decade, popping in on and off to do maintenance on his grafts, but Dabi's not mad, that's how the underground works. Nobody's gonna give you charity if you don't have shit to give back.

Besides, hopping from odd job to odd job, he's had plenty of time to foster his hatred for the dear old man and think up a mental list of every way to roast Shouto in front of him.

Dabi is very much a growing guy still though, and that means grafts need to be changed, extended. No Doc no grafts. He's got Bakugou Katsuki to thank for that.

The damn pest. Big boss All for One says the freak must be able to come back from the dead, and every villain worth their shit knows he's got some quirk bending superpower on top of that. He left Chisaki Kai catatonic and blew up half his basement, that's what the streets say.

And worst of all, Touya spilled him *all* the beans. He knows *everything*. Down to Endeavor's irrational hatred of off-brand Endeavor merchandise. In Dabi's defense, the guy looked so fucked in that basement Dabi would have never ever thought him capable of making any sort of comeback, and he was blabbing about Mr.Crusty and ballet and Shakespeare. Surely, he doesn't remember. He *can't* remember. That brat was the worst Dabi has ever seen the Doc treat a live plaything, and no part of the conversation they'd had would have sounded remotely sane to an outsider. Hell, his sanity is questionable even now, a good year later. He shouldn't remember and that's the thing. Bakugou Katsuki is such a walking contradiction Dabi is sure he *does* remember, out of spite if anything.

So it comes down to whether the guy is fond of gossip. Because if anyone told the police about Ujiko is was Bakugou, and if whatever Bakugou used to tell them included any peep of Todoroki Touya, let's just say it would make for a very boring grand reveal.

“Hey, birdman.” He creeps his gaze over to the number two hero, who’s opted to saunter into this room out of all the million rooms in this mansion. Great.

“Twice. Twice,” the hero replies, nodding once to each copy of Twice.

“Get over here,” Twice says, and tugs at Hawks’ wing until he comes crashing on the couch. Dabi scowls internally. He’ll never understand why Twice is so fond of Hawks, and why the dumbfuck can’t tell Hawks is the worst double agent in existence. “You seem beat.”

He does. His hair is all tousled, his feathers point every which way, and his face is etched in stress marks. There are crusty stains of blood on his cuffs, too. Hard to notice but there if you look hard enough. Curiously, the hero himself only seems to realize he’s made the mistake of showing up so disheveled at that moment and has no choice but to play along.

“I am beat.”

“Finally doing some dirty work?” Dabi says, enjoying the way it ruffles birdie’s feathers.

“Let’s go with that.”

“’Bout time. Was starting to think you were all talk.”

“Lay off him. He’s got cover to hold up.”

Dabi ignores Twice. “What’d you do? Murder babies? Kidnap school children? Litter?”

“We don’t murder babies! Stop perpetuating stereotypes—!” Twice interjects, scandalized.

“I’m pretty sure we do. Or at least we don’t give a shit if they happen to be collateral damage.” Twice looks like he’s had his puppy kicked. “I mean, you think those buildings in Deika Shigaraki dusted had no babies in them? Or old people? Or kids?”

“I haven’t joined the League to murder babies,” Hawks says shortly, and Dabi almost laughs at how uncomfortable he is with the more unsavory parts of what they do. He’s not fooling anyone.

And look okay, Dabi doesn’t care anymore, about any human of any size, shape, or age not two meters tall with a flaming beard named

Endeavor. The only baby he's ever given a shit about is a certain two-tone-haired sack of potatoes he should have strangled when he had the chance, and that baby's a fruit of the past.

"Right, of course. Remind me why you've joined again?"

"Because I want a new world order."

"Right." Not a secret mission from his HPSC owners or anything. "How could I forget."

That Hawks hates his HPSC slave drivers, Dabi can buy. That he's on board with Shigaraki's *destroy everything* plan? Never in any world. It's a pretty dumb plan, as far as plans go. Dabi sticks around because he doesn't care if the world burns as long as he gets to burn Endeavor with it, and the rest of the followers are either too numb to care, too stupid, insane, or too enamored by the fuzzies you're guaranteed to get from Shigaraki's unexpected attentiveness.

Because slimy as he is, the guy can be genuinely nice sometimes. He'd fulfilled their promise of getting sushi, and he always lets Spinner braid his hair, and he always makes sure Dabi has burn creams at the ready. It's fucking *weird*. The longer he spends away from All for One, the nicer he gets to his League buddies. The guy is attached. Dabi would feel bad about not reciprocating to quite that degree if he still had the emotional capacity to give a shit.

"Anyway, I need to talk to the boss."

"Which one?" says Dabi, pretending not to understand.

"Shigaraki," Hawks drawls out, all condescending.

"No can do, birdman."

"How come?"

"He tried to cut his hair into a mullet and it looks horrible so he's spending the rest of the year in the bathroom out of shame." "Boss' is getting upgrades from the Doc. His new body is gonna take ages to get ready. We don't know where he's at." He and Twice answer at the same time. Dabi shoots him a dirty look.

"I thought the Doc was in hiding," Hawks says, a look on his face that lets Dabi know he's not sure what to do with the information that Shigaraki is getting even more upgrades following the Deika thing.

Poor heroes.

“So did I.” Dabi shrugs. Shiggy’s upgrades could have been falling out the sky for all he cared.

“Still is,” Twice explains. “But he got in contact with Boss. At least that’s what Toga told me.”

Toga’s not the most reliable but eh, he’s already bored of this conversation.

“And how long will the upgrades take?”

“Dunno. A year, give or take.” The corners of Hawks’ face blanch. He’s too obvious. “Destro will take care of the divisions until then.”

“Hate that ass,” Hawks mutters, and it may be the only thing they agree on.

“Have you two watched the news recently?” asks the hero, after a brief silence.

“Nope.” “Yes.”

“Anything interesting?”

“Are you asking if we’ve seen proof of your so called dirty work? Because it’s going to be a no from me.” “Oh yes.”

Dabi doesn’t care what news Twice finds interesting, but the fact that Hawks is asking means birdy is trying to fish for some sort of information. And since news can easily be found on just about every other website, he’s looking for specifically, Dabi and Twice’s reactions to this information. Now *that’s* interesting. Dabi has no intention of showing that he thinks so, though, so he leans further into the couch and closes his eyes, feigning unattentiveness.

Twice shuffles, and mutters something about stupid touchscreens and stupid gloves that don’t work on touchscreens. “There,” he says, and Dabi doesn’t need to open his eyes to visualize Hawks leaning over Twice’s shoulder to look at this information he totally, definitely hadn't known before.

Lucky for Dabi, Twice has pulled up a video clip from Channel Six broadcasts, and hiked up the volume enough that even a half-deaf grandpa might hear it.

“The parking lot of a Tokyu Hands store in Southern Musutafu has been the scene of a horrific crime this Monday afternoon. Official sources are still unclear on the exact chain of events but it has been reported that, at approximately midnight, a large explosion occurred, destroying five cars, damaging ten more, and smashing the windows of the department store’s supply room. As the building was built to withstand villain attacks, none inside were wounded, but the remains of a body were discovered at the epicenter of the explosion. Low quality and grainy clips taken from the store’s security cameras reveal two well-disguised figures clashing minutes before the explosion, and the type of blasts aligns with bombs made with a nitroglycerin base —” Dabi’s finger twitches, and he gets the sense that he knows exactly what Hawks is trying to get them to react to. “The victim is yet to be identified, and neither figure’s image matches with any known villain. The network will do its best to procure updates on the situation as soon as possible. In the meantime, in the wake of the twenty percent increase in villain attack incidence since the retirement of All Might, we recommend watching the following segment on safety for civilians in the midst of heroes and villains—”

Twice shuts the video off. “This’s all anyone’s been talking about. Geten iced a whole aquarium and the news barely gave it a couple minutes of screen time. Isn’t it unfair?”

“Geten iced an aquarium?” Hawks says in surprise. Dabi might be imagining the hint of disappointment at Twice taking the discussion in a whole different direction, but he’s inclined to believe he isn’t.

“Exactly.”

They lounge around for a bit longer until Twice gets bored (all three copies of him) and skips out of the room to “play Mario Cart with Spinner”. Dabi waits, patient. Knows the question he’s expecting to come will come. Two minutes of quiet and Hawks sucks in a breath.

“What happened to that Bakugou guy, back then?” He says *that Bakugou guy* as if half the reason he’d become a double age— ahem, joined them wasn’t *that Bakugou guy*. Dabi enjoyed trolling him back then, leading him around like a pig following a carrot with bullshit information. He’s not sure what answer to give now, though, so he cracks open an eye and he decides to put Birdy on the spot.

“You think it’s him behind that parking lot explosion?”

If Hawks is taken aback by Dabi’s question, he doesn’t show it.

“Nitroglycerin isn’t a common quirk,” he admits. They don’t bother talking about Bakugou as if he’s dead, because they both know he isn’t, the entire underground knows it.

“Doubt he’s got a quirk anymore.”

“There is the stuff he does to quirks.” Which Dabi has yet to figure out.

“Isn’t All For One worried about him?”

“Elaborate, birdman.”

“Bakugou’s case proves people can resist his quirk. He’s an information leak too.”

Dabi rolls over and rests his head on the arm of the couch. Hawks is all sprawled out, dirty leaving stains on the pristine leather as every proper villain should. “So there *are* a few brain cells in that pretty head of yours,” he says slowly, holding the hero’s gaze. Without the tinted visor, his eyes are a troubled gold. “Whole reason we’re looking for him.”

“I figured.”

“I’m sure your commission masters want a piece of him too.” Hawks scans his face, mouth tightening at the mention of the HPSC, and makes no move to deny it. In fact, he seems to carry an air of guilt.

“Where’d you get bloody at, birdman?” Dabi presses, and tips his head further back. Hawks doesn’t like that he’s noticed. The yellow coat smells sweet, and upon closer inspection, Hawks is messy and reckless in a way that’s rare for him. His whole public persona as number two is permeated by that *laissez-faire* attitude, but today, he appears to have fully stopped giving a fuck. Dabi could always tell he’s a double agent, but this Hawks is so loose other people might catch on as well, or, on the other end of the spectrum, his act may appear a little *too* genuine. It’s been a year short of a decade since Dabi was thrown headfirst into these circles, so he knows a thing or two. Any villain worth a damn is at least a pale shade of unhinged, and Hawks’ shade is looking so bright it could scare his commission buddies into thinking he’s betrayed them.

It’s kind of hot.

“This?” He holds his sleeve up to the chandelier. “Forgot to scrub it

off.”

A mutual understanding passes between them, an acknowledgment that neither is what or who they claim to be. Is this how they’re doing things? A challenge tints Hawks’ eyes. Dabi wets his lips.

“Your grafts, they’re coming apart, aren’t they?” Hawks says then, and it’s so unexpected Dabi has to stop himself from doing a double-take. No one else has noticed. “Why don’t you get them looked at?”

“Oh, you know—”

“Doc’s not around,” the hero fills in. “And no one else is good enough.”

“Bingo.”

“I know people. I could hook you up.” *Oh. Ohh.*

“Get me a nice smooch from Recovery Girl?”

“Maybe not that far.”

“…Alright, bird boy. I’ll owe you one.” The hero’s lines relax. Dabi turns away and smiles a small, hidden thing. Whatever leash Hawks has loosened, he’ll keep the secret.

From Oboe Noriko’s research into Bakugou Katsuki, written for Bakugou Katsuki. File size 7.4 GB. 921 pages. Format PDF.

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[Expand]

Notable excerpts:

[Original "boy who lived" post posted on *Flitter* bu @*lootcroine* and popularized by true crime forum *Sidewalk Sleuth.* This is a thread of theory that correctly assumes you lived through the first kidnapping. First written a week following the official announcement of death.]

@*lootcroine* posted:
Hot take. Bakugou related, of course, since it's all this stupid app seems to care about these days. Snowflakes hold on to your pants, because this one might be a little offensive. Bakugou apologists, I'm looking at those of you I haven't managed to block yet especially.
You're probably tired of talking about this kid by now, huh? I am too, I won't pretend to have any sympathy for quirkists. But loot! you're probably thinking, you've surely seen the pictures! No one deserves that! Much less a kid! And to this I say, you can't be gullible enough to buy that horror movie set hogwash. There is no reason why any villain would need to torture a waste of space such as Bakugou to that degree, much less a villain organization on the scale of the League of Villains. We have all had the displeasure of seeing this… specimen of a piece of shit in action, and I think that we can all agree that, given the chance, promised power, he wouldn't hesitate to join the villains of his own free will. "The police confirmed the DNA! UA said—" Officials lie. All the time. Think of all the holes in the story. First, Bakugou's parents leave their son home alone in favor of a two month trip immediately following a violent expulsion. Not only do they do this, they fail to check on him for an entire month. Farfetched, especially considering the Bakugou's reputations as respectable and upstanding people. Second, UA offers no protection to a volatile ex student who's been before targeted by villains, absurd. Third, photos of this so called jail cell conveniently surface days following an incident that should have ended with Bakugou Katsuki officially named a villain. Shapeshifting quirks? Tortured to death? Hogwash. It's all manipulation by the Bakugou's in a sad attempt to rescue the dignity of their brand and not admit their son has turned villain. I believe Bakugou is still alive, joined the League of his own free will in a thirst for vengeance, and the entire kidnapping story is fabricated pro Bakugou propaganda. The truth will come to light #MyTruth

@*sucpanda* replied
Based take king
@*sucpanda*
They're going to come for you

@*rationalip* replied

You made no points. Word fucking salad. What the fuck are you even talking about. A family is in mourning and you post this shit?

@*sucpanda* replied

Ratio

@*pinklomocard* replied

"His parents didn't check on him for a month." "UA offers no protection to a volatile ex-student" Sounds like you agree he was getting neglected to me idk.

@*ninjaedge* replied

I've been saying this! Even people who hate him can't deny the facts. No matter how you slice it the family and UA have admitted to not giving a crap about his wellbeing for long enough that it had serious consequences. If they were so worried about their PR, they wouldn't put themselves in the line of fire like that

@*pinklomocard* replied

The truth is that the whole country turned on Bakugou Katsuki because he was a stupid teenager of all things. I've seen more vitriol directed at a sixteen-year-old than I have directed at villains on here, I swear. Now, we get to see those horrific pictures, and people still don't understand things went too far.

@*endysboobs* replied

You spek as if we personally turned him into that bloody puddle. The media has no effect on villains.

@*pinklomocard* replied

Yeah, they just helped create a massive target everyone would love to see gone

@*plumepurple* replied

How about we stop wasting our rescouces and time on this one horrible child and start focusing on the millions of children that experience quirkism each day?

Bakugou Katsuki is a stain on our society. By all means, let him stay dead.

@*5546hdgoku* replied
Dude, your so right. It was Bakugu at the bank with Dabi tat day, ik it. His parents are just trying and failing to scoop up their shit.
Shapeshifting quirk? nobody believing that lmaoo

+ + +

@*lazydazy76* posted*:*
A response to @lootcroine's thread, which contained but one nugget of worthwhile assumption. I also believe Bakugou is still alive, simply because the body has not been found— his status as dead was court ordered. If you look at the third picture posted by the exclusive, you'll see that it's the only one that shows a bit of floor, And there are bloody footsteps clearly leading straight through the cell door. I doubt the crime scene investigators were stupid enough to make those themselves, so it's reasonable to believe Bakugou at the very least made it to his door alive. He didn't die anywhere near the premises, so I don't think he's dead at all.

@*lionheart* replied
Finally, a level take. What struck me odd is that they made the announcement so quickly. You'd think they'd search a little more before deciding he's gone for good.

@*lazydazy76* replied
The only asnwer I can think of is that they needed a way to clear him of the bank incident fast, and this was the quickest way to do it. It's not nice to think about, but his parents don't seem like they give much of a crap either.

@*innocenthelos* replied
Idk if Im allowed to say this but I know people who work at the station investigating the case n apprently there were footsteps leading all the way to the edge of the factory warehouse mightve been more if it werent for the rain, he def got out

@*lazydazy76* replied
Shit. that's huge

@*innocenthelos* replied

Stop liking this guys theyre gonna take my account down TT

[User @lazydazy76 also had a Sidewalk Sleuths account of the same username, and got these responses after posting to this site]

u/**lazydazy76**
Someone told me on flitter that according to the police bakugou's footsteps lead all the way upstairs. Could he really be alive?

↳ u/**sherlockwannabe** replied:

Lmao, ofc he's alive

↳ u/**lazydazy76** replied:

What do you mean

↳ u/**sherlockwannabe** replied:

It's common knowledge in shadier circles round here. Guess the news hasn't spread to the rest of the country. Some claim to have seen him in tokyo weeks ago

↳ u/**lazydazy76** replied:

Whaaat?

↳ u/**sherlockwannabe** replied:

Yeah. There are rumors he can mess with your quirk like a drug or suck out your soul

↳ u/**lazydazy76** replied:

That's ridiculous

↳ u/**sherlockwannabe** replied:

It's what the streets say

↳ u/**lazydazy76** replied:

Why haven't I seen any posts about it?????

↳ u/**sherlockwannabe** replied:

You won't find any on here. The mods delete and ban everything with his name in it idk how this thread's still alive

[It was deleted hours after being posted, but the news continued to spread in small circles via private messages. Meanwhile, a separate thread of theory began about a new vigilante named "Static" spurred by the Live Book posting "Why I've been IA (looking for the identity of mystery rescuer)" made by @solsana, the sister of the kid almost kidnapped during the Ginza Itoya Incident.]

[Read her original blog post here: Why I've been IA...]

[The Vigilante Registry, an unofficial website that's editable by the public and collects information on known vigilantes, was updated with a new entry a few hours following SOL-Sana's post.]

Name: Undecided
Appearance: Dressed in casual clothes and streetwear. Pale with off white hair and most of their skin covered. Image and voice obscured by static.
Quirk: Unknown (possibly causing electrical interference to digital devices)
Personality: Rude. Confrontational. Blasé. Unaware of the magnitude of what they're doing.
Feats: Ginza Itoya Burning Car incident.
Areas of operation: Tokyo
Age: 18-38

--->This entry is way too sparse

--->We don't have much info yet.

---> Isn't it weird that the police won't release the files from the

interviews they must've done with the two kidnappers who were caught? Or the security cam footage, even if it's grainy?

---> Not really. They only do that for big cases. The Miyamuras might have also asked for privacy. It might pose some sort of security risk.

---> Or maybe they want to keep this vigilante under wraps.

---> We don't even know if they are a vigilante.

---> A hero would have claimed responsibility by now.

---> Dunno…

[Despite doubts, the figure of Static begun taking shape, and it was weeks later that it fully materialized, thanks to this post on the "Who helped me?" section of The Vigilante Registry forums, where users can give descriptions of whatever vigilante they believe they might have encountered and have the case linked to their registry entry]

Sodaman wrote:

About a few weeks ago, this young man came into my store late at night. He was wearing a thick scarf that obscured most of his face, and headed immediately for the pet food aisle. It just so happened that while he was waiting at checkout, another customer pulled a knife on me and ordered me to empty my register. For your information, my store is small as far as grocery stores are concerned and this has never happened. Of course, I crambled and began to panic. My quirk isn't well suited to combat, and I had no idea how to react besides trying to call the police. To my surprise, the young man who was the only other person in the store at the time decided to interfere, completely calm, by telling my assailant to "Wait your turn. I was paying for my shit." I dropped my phone I was so shocked. Who says that to an armed robber?! And he just kept going like "Didn't your parents teach you not to cut in line?" TO THE ARMED ROBBER! The robber reminded him of as much, and turned back to me, told me I'd die if I didn't empty the register. The young man then interfered again to tell me "not to touch the damn register" and "call the damn police". Then he said he'd kill me if I did what the armed robber said! At that point I had no idea who was on my side and who wasn't, and frankly, I think I pissed myself a little. To make matters worse, the robber finally

lunged at the guy, and got dismantled in two seconds flat. I'm talking a single move and mystery boy had him pinned to the check out desk. He told me to "get a rope" as if my incompetence was bothering him, and I spent ten minutes in the back room fighting off a panic attack. I went back and watched mystery boy tie up the robber to a chair like a damn professional and when I tried to thank him for saving me by offering the groceries he was buying for free he told me paraphrased: "Nothing much would have . happened even if I hadn't been here. A three-day hospital stay for a stab wound at most" because that's nothing??????? and "Take my money or I'll kill you." He payed and scrambled out of the store without ever giving me his name. I would have posted this on here sooner, but I'm bad with electronics, don't even got a touch screen phone, and it took a while to find the proper website to post, AND pass its vetting process. WHM?

(EDIT: I couldn't see most of his lower face but he was very very pale, with almost white hair and pale reddish eyes. He had no gloves and his hands were quite scarred. His voice was rough and measured. I do have security cam footage, but it's useless. My cameras aren't good quality to begin with (you know, quiet area, bad at tech, no need) and that night they went really crazy, glitching and buzzing out.)

(EDIT: The consensus seems to be a vigilante by the name of Static. Thank you for your help everyone, even if I have no idea what to do with this information)

---> I'd need a little more info about his appearance. You have security cam footage?

---> Oh yeah I'd better include that in my post. ***(OP)***

---> OMG I think we've got another case of Static. OP, you should have mentioned the cameras went haywire first thing.

---> What's Static? ***(OP)***

---> The guy who rescued that kid from the Itoya failed kidnapping ordeal.

---> Never heard of him or this failed kidnapping ordeal. ***(OP)***

---> Where're you based? That might have something to do with it.

---> Near Nara. ***(OP)***

---> Damn. What's Static doing over there

---> This is definitely static. "Take my money or I'll kill you" what a legend.

---> We stan.

---> Stop speaking like cringy people on glitter

---> Someone update Static's entry right now.

---> OP, as much as I'd love to believe this, I find it weird that I didn't see it on the news anywhere. Seems like something you'd report.

---> Yeah, about that. I ended up making a deal with the robber. Turned out he was just a homeless guy down on his luck. He hadn't had food or anything like that for ages, and he hadn't been planning to hurt me, just take the money and steal some goods and leave. Said his mutation quirk stopped him from getting a job. I ended up giving him the address to a shelter that helps mutants get back on their feet a few streets down. My second cousin runs it. He's back on his feet now and we're all good. It wasn't on the news because I never did report it. ***(OP)***

---> Either you're a really good person or this is all a total fabrication. Sorry OP; but your explanation just made my doubts worth.

---> I'm not lying. Here's the cam footage if it helps *[mysteryboy.mp4]* ***(OP)***

---> It's static. It's gotta be him.

---> Wow wow wow.

---> I can

only see blobs but I can tell he's a badass.

---> Holy shit, is this our first bit of footage?

---> You weren't lying about the quality OP

[Static's updated entry]

Name: Static
Appearance: Dressed in casual clothes and streetwear. Pale with off white hair and most of their skin covered. Pale red eyes. Scarred hands. Image and voice obscured by static.
Quirk: Unknown (possibly causing electrical interference to digital devices)
Personality: Rude. Confrontational. Blasé. Unaware of the magnitude of what they're doing.
Feats: Ginza Itoya Burning Car incident. Nara Grocery Store Robbery
Areas of operation: Tokyo, Nara
Age: 18-25
Gender: Presumed Male
Footage: *mysteryboy.mp4*

---> Can I say that Static's whole demeanor screams disgruntled teenager? He might be younger than 18

---> Nah. No kid is that competent.

---> Kids these days are scary man…

---> I think 18-19 is on the mark.

---> Someone please explain to me why Static's area of operation is so spread out. Nara and Tokyo aren't exactly close

---> His quirk could be teleportation.

---> That's consipracy theory territorry bro

[The mythos of Static grew and soon he was attributed incidents that I doubt you had a hand in]

1. Yamagata Train Blockade
2. Ginzan Spring Explosion

3. Himamori Arcade Arson
4. Kanazawa Submarine Burglary
5. Sapporo Ramen Shop Hostage Situation
[Expand]

[People have also theorized that Static *is* Bakugou Katsuki, to mixed reception]

u/**TinfoilHattie**

Hear me out. Pale hair, pale skin, explosive personality, combat training? Bakugou fits the bill, and the Itoya Burning car incident happened on the exact day Bakugou was announced dead. Isn't it a freaky coincidence?

> ↳ You have no evidence besides the appearance my dude, which doesn't even match. Besides, people can dye their hair, wear colored contacts…
>
> ↳ I buy it.
>
> ↳ Bakugou also ran over my dog and saved my dead grandma from a tree. Mhm.
>
> ↳ I think he runs the Illuminati
>
> ↳ Let that boy rest in peace by the love of god.

[As for your involvement in the Hassaikai Case, the Police have kept info on the case airtight, and any leaks are only spread in deep villain circles based on stories the ex members of the Hassaikai are spreading in jail. Don't ask how I figured this out]

[Last but not least, the Sun Shop. You're lucky that it has a cult following dedicated to preserving the Shop's secrecy because you'll find few theories regarding the identity of the mystery assistant online. Here are some excerpts from the "official" follower websites]

There's a new assisstant at the Sun Shop! Monday - 23:02

5,826 likes 234 shares

I went today to buy a tonic for my joint pain, and this young boy was kind enough to help me. I wonder who he is.

----------> Yeah, that's a slippery slope you shouldn't go down. A couple years back people tried to figure out the identity of the original clerk, and they stopped operating the shop for months. It happens everytime someone tries to look too deep into it. Are you new here?

----------> Seconded. We're all curious, but keeping the shop around is more important. The assistant's ability to fix quirk drug-related problems might put them in serious danger. Don't speculate, please. Or you'll be banned from the forum.

[Speculation continued, however, and users assumed that the shop's open hours shrinking had something to do with them overly snooping. So these types of theories were witch-hunted off more official forums. Of course, you can't stop people from wondering. I've linked all the theories that might prove risky. I don't know what you'll be able to do, but you'd be safer with these off the internet]

1. How the Assistant's quirk manipulation works
2. List of notable people with meta quirks that may be related to (or be) Assistant
3. Chronicle of Assistant's hair colors (and which may be his real one)
4. What happened to the original clerk?
5. Why the Sun Shop is in danger?
6. Static and Assisstant.
7. Underground rumors about Bakugou Katsuki that are very interesting
8. Bakugou Katsuki has become a crime lord
9. Assisstant is Bakugou Katsuki and I can prove it
10. Assistant is Bakugou Katsuki and Static and I can prove it, pt 2
11. A compilation of Bakugou's crimes
12. What really happened at the Hassaikai?

[Expand]

By the time Katsuki has poured through all a thousand pages of data, his eyes are weeping dry and a migraine is splitting his head apart. This is… way more than he ever expected. It's too much, a dangerous amount of much. He's going to have to do something about it.

Chapter End Notes

1. so... there it is.
2. i'd left off the draft at the half-finished Dabi section in the beginning, and i was unironically laughing out loud when i first read it. it seriously cracked me up and restored my motivation to write lmaoo
3. the convo between dabi and hawks probably makes little sense right now, but I'm curious to see how you guys will interpret it.
4. formatting was a total bitch for the social media half of the chapter. I'm not that happy with it but better done than perfect amidst writer's block.
5. writing it out made me realize how messy the timelines have become for this fic like I've really written 200k+ words of mostly canon independent material that's crazy. the plotholes are also probably crazy TT
6. i have no idea if the dabi I've written is anywhere close to canon dabi but he's my flirty degenerate and i love him
7. I'm not sure how much of canon I'll mix into this plot going forward by the way
8. the Jakku-esque situation is gonna happen when class 1-A are in their third year, btw.
9. This is the first of three pre-final timeskip interludes, BTW. The next one features Mitsuki and I am very excited for it.
10. I can't promise a stable schedule going forward because i'd feel like a liar but I'll do my best.
11. The 40 chapters is 99% the final count.
12. I love you guys, and I've read every single comment, I promise.
13. the grammar in the socmed half of the chapter is intentionally unbetad, to imitate how people write on socmed platforms irl.
14. I'm not planning on writing any romance btw i just love making dabi flirty
15 i hope it didn't suck

Chapter 30: Interlude No.2: Mitsuki (The Return)

Chapter Summary

Keeping up with Mitsuki

Chapter Notes

Im real nervous for this one. It's been ages since the last Mitsuki chapter and this is an interlude, so there's not really much going on in terms of plot progression, but... i hope you'll enjoy it.
posting this early bc it's the new year soon and I'm gonna be busy these next few days

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The parking lot of a Tokyu Hands store in Southern Musutafu has been the scene of a horrific crime this Monday afternoon. Official sources are still unclear on the exact chain of events but it has been reported that, at approximately midnight, a large explosion occurred, destroying five cars, damaging ten more, and smashing the windows of the department store’s supply room.” Mitsuki twists the nob that controls the radio’s volume until the sound is mostly drowned out by the thrum of traffic. She keeps her eyes on the thinning line of cars in front of her. “As the building was built to withstand villain attacks, none inside were wounded, but the remains of a body were discovered at the epicenter of the explosion. Clips taken from the store’s security cameras reveal two well-disguised figures clashing minutes before the explosion, and the type of blasts aligns with bombs made with a nitroglycerin—” It’s stupid, the way her grip on the steering wheel tightens without her meaning to and her free hand flies back to the dial to crank the volume right up “—base. The victim is yet to be identified, and neither figure’s image matches with any known villain. The network will do its best to procure updates on the situation as soon as possible. In the meantime, in the wake of the twenty percent increase in villain attack incidence since the retirement of All Might, we recommend watching the following segment on safety for civilians in the midst of heroes and villains—”

Of course, there’s no mention of Katsuki; only the deepest, most delusional parts of her had been expecting a mention of Katsuki. Tsukauchi has been unable to uncover a single peep surrounding him for months — she hasn’t been sent any news or received a single call

since that day she and Masaru met the guy in his office and decided to pull the plug on their son's official life. Besides, nitroglycerin might be a rare quirk, but it can be made in other ways, and most dynamite (quite the common explosive) contains a large amount of it. Nitroglycerin being involved doesn't mean Katsuki's also the one exploding cars and killing people in craft store parking lots. That's ridiculous.

She doesn't even know if her son is still alive.

Caught up in that thought, she gets honked at by five separate drivers and almost bumps into the mirrors of this one expensive-ass-looking car. Once she's finally pulled into their apartment complex's parking lot, she turns the car off and takes a moment to lay her head on the steering wheel and try to get her breathing in order. Masaru left on a three-day trip to a dress history conference in Kyoto yesterday, and she's dreading the feel of the house without him. Barren, empty, lifeless. No matter how small an apartment they picked it would always feel the same.

Not for the first time, she wonders how Katsuki ever handled the solitude for the weeks they'd spend abroad and he had a whole mini-mansion to himself if she can barely handle a weekend in a much cozier space. She imagines his unruly head of pale gold hair at eleven, wearing those huge black pajamas he used to love and spending days at a time with no one to talk to but the walls and himself.

+ + +

She was pissed and exhausted. First, the trip to Paris Fashion week had been a disaster of massive proportion. Perhaps naively, they'd assumed the backing for this year's clothing lines was in the bag, and they'd modeled and budgeted the rest of the year for their business running off that assumption. Well, the motherfuckers rejected it in favor of some local designer who had nepotism stamped all over his bony face, under the guise of reduced funding due to the post-recession wreck that had become of the economy. Said post-recession wreck was the whole reason they were hinging on this sponsorship in the first place— they'd also been hit hard. A single word from those sponsors and their future was now in the air. If they didn't find other means of funding soon, they wouldn't be able to release a new line this year, might need to lay off employees, and they knew of many stories where this type of rejection dominoed into bankruptcy. With nothing left to do in France, they arranged for their trip home to be rushed. The airline offered to relocate their tickets, but it came with

an unexpected cost— they had to drive for hours following a red-eye flight from Paris that ended up delivering them to the wrong airport. She wanted nothing more than to lay on her bed and rest and seeth for a whole week. The hotels they stayed at were not shabby by any means, but the phrase “there’s no place like home” didn’t exist for no reason, and she ached to sink into the comfort of their own huge bed, under their own roof.

“Honey, do you have the keys?” Masaru asked her, eyes droopy. Rummaging in her purse provided her with no keys to speak of, and one look at the mess of luggage that was the back seat of the car made her mind go ‘nope’. She waited for Masaru to turn off the car and swung her door open, letting the cool air of early morning keep her awake.

“Katsuki can open it for us.”

“It’s three am,” Masaru said. “He might be sleeping.”

“He’ll wake up.”

They had to ring the doorbell for far far too long. Her exhausted mood soured into irritated frustration fast. How long was he going to have them wait? He could afford to wake up this once. Kids were supposed to have energy.

The door opened after thirty minutes, and she pushed her carry-on suitcase inside without sparing a glance at the one who opened it. “Could you have been slower?” she said loudly, pulling off her heavy boots without grace.

For a flash, Katsuki stared at her with empty eyes, as if he had forgotten her face (it had only been three weeks, what a drama queen), or rather didn’t want to remember it, then his gaze defaulted to the resting bitch face he loved to parade around wearing. His clothes were crinkled, his cheeks were dark, his hair stuck up weird— it was clear he’d woken up in a stupor —and he was holding a saucepan. Had he thought they were intruders? Had he been planning to deal with intruders with a saucepan?

“You didn’t say you’d be coming back today.”

“There was a last-minute change of plans. The airline gave us tickets to an earlier flight. Your father told you.”

“I thought you did, dear. You told me you would.”

Had she? She was busy. It must have slipped her mind.

“Neither of you did,” Katsuki said, all bitter.

“Don’t speak with that tone. We had work to do. Work that keeps this roof over your head and food on your table—” Her lecture trailed off as her eyes landed on the shadows of mess covering the kitchen counters. Flipping the light switch on revealed total disorder. Cabinet doors were left open, drawers rolled out, a mound of dishes sat in the sink unwashed and a cluster of teaboxes was spread on the counter. Near them, there were three separate amber bottles of cough syrup and two pillboxes with their instructions folded out. She stomped inside and frowned at the disarray, her irritation doubling.

“What have you been doing? Do you think this is a drug den?” Mitsuki recognized the packaging of the pills —they were antipyretics and pain killers from her and Masaru’s medicine cabinet, the one they kept locked. She examined the honey jar left uncapped and the chunks of cubed ginger that were dotting the tiles of the floor. “Who the fuck told you it was okay to use shit from our bathroom?!”

It was good that the windows had their curtains drawn, because she had no idea how long the kitchen had been in this state, and with the room being visible from outside, the neighbors could have been making all sorts of assumptions. They needed to put a reflective coating on the windows stat.

Katsuki’s hazed-over eyes took in the mess he’d made like he was seeing it for the first time in his life. In the light, he himself seemed a mess. The darkness of his cheeks was the result of a flush, and his skin was covered by a sheen of sweat. “I got sick,” he said, shaking his head. “I didn’t know what to do—”

All she heard were excuses. “You should have called, then.” The last time he did had been two weeks ago, she thought. “This is arrhythmia medication, brat. What the fuck do you need it for?”

“My chest was hurting—”

“You’re *twelve*—”

“Thirteen.”

“—you don’t have fucking heart disease!” She walked up to him and placed a hand on his forehead roughly, holding him in place with her other. He was warm to the touch, and his breathing seemed labored.

“You probably have a cold, which the antipyretic and the antipyretic only would have solved just fine, which you’d know if you’d called instead of being stubborn,” she snapped.

“Shut up.”

Her temper rose. “Have you been sick the whole month, or is that your excuse for slacking off?” An urge to examine every room in the house overtook her, and she brushed past him to flip on the light switches in the hallway and living room. The former’s floor was riddled with haphazardly thrown personal items, while the latter had been so neglected the leather couch that cost millions of yen was covered in dust. “We leave you here because we trust you, and *this* is how you repay it? Is it a human or an animal who’s been using our house? What do you think the neighbors would think of our family if they saw this?”

“Stop.”

A sketchbook that had fallen out of Katsuki’s discarded schoolbag nearly tripped her, and she leaned down to pick it up. Pages upon pages of ugly scribbles marked ‘hero costume’ and ‘support gear’. It reminded her of her own messy sketches as a teenager, of the folder in the back of the trunk with the clothing line she’d spent months designing only to get it thrown back in her face and rejected. “Has this shit been distracting you?” He flinched as she tore out a page and crumpled it. “You used to draw better than this at five, Katsuki. If you’re going to do something, at least make it wor—”

An explosion sparked from his hands, nothing big enough to do damage but nothing small enough not to make noise. Said noise rattled through Mitsuki’s aching head like a war drum. She flung the sketchbook at his feet. “You little shit—”

“Fucking *stop*,” he interrupted forcefully, voice cracking in a way that made Mitsuki do a double-take. “Fuck you. I *hate* you. I wish your plane had fucking crashed—”

“You don’t mean that Katsuki,” Masaru said from where he’d descended the stairs, his voice soft in comparison to the two of them. Katsuki leveled him the same hateful stare he’d leveled Mitsuki.

“Don’t think you’re excluded because you hide in the bathroom when she does this shit, old man. What’s wrong with you two?! Usually, you at least *pretend* to care.”

“We do care—”

“More about the stupid fucking house than me!”

Mitsuki frowned at the sight of her kid more frustrated than he’d ever seen him. It was a miracle that he hadn’t stormed out yet. Where was this coming from? *Of course*, they cared. That they were busy and had to be away a lot didn’t mean they didn’t.

“Don’t you dare say that! You have *everything*. We buy you everything you could ever want and bail you out of every bit of trouble at school and give you free rein of all of your time, yet there are kids out there with a quarter of what you have who are far more grateful for it than you’ve ever been. Have you ever thought that maybe it’s on you? We’re exhausted, Katsuki. We traveled for fourteen hours after facing such a major rejection that we have no idea if our business will make it through the year, your father hasn’t slept in two days — neither of us needs to deal with *you* on top of that. Can’t you be a quiet well-behaved kid for once in your useless fucking life?”

She exhaled when she was finished, and instantly thought the whole monologue was pretty much an amalgamation of the worst things she could have said. Katsuki went very quiet, and for a moment, she was terrified of what she’d done. He kicked the wrinkled sketchbook, stuck his hands deep into his pockets as though he was restraining himself, and ignored the fuck out of Masaru on the way upstairs. His door slammed shut with such force a picture frame in the hall downstairs rattled.

Her eyes were wide as she looked at her husband, and she felt them begin to sting. This week was going horribly.

“Let him sleep on it. He’ll have forgotten tomorrow,” Masaru told her, not denying that she’d been way out of line. “Kids forget these things.”

“He’s not three.”

“You’re stressed, honey. It’s understandable that you’re lashing out. Explain it to him carefully in the morning and it’ll all be fine.”

“He said he was sick. He never admits he’s sick.” She began to pace. “Why the fuck did I say all that—?”

In the morning, Katsuki did not come down for breakfast. She’d calmed down enough to self-reflect and come to the conclusion that, yes, she’d gone too far with the scolding, but it wasn’t entirely

unwarranted either. If he'd taken the wrong medicines (or a bad combination of them) he could have hurt himself, and taking care of the house was his duty as the person living in it. She'd been harsh, but there'd been reason for it. She wanted the best for Katsuki. In her head, she planned how to hash out the situation with him without either of them exploding.

However, noon rolled past and there was still no sight of Katsuki. Was he giving her the silent treatment? Who gave him the right to treat her as if she were some stranger rather than his mother? She stood in front of the closed door of his room and called his name to no answer. Enough was enough. She opened the door and saw nowhere for him to be but the mound of blankets on the bed.

"Brat, do you intend to sleep your whole life away—?'" The sight of him made her freeze. His face managed to be both flushed and sallow, and his breaths came out like gasps even as he slept. It was the sickest she'd ever seen him. "Shit," she said lowly.

+ + +

He'd had severe pneumonia and needed to spend a week in the hospital. It had gotten to that point because he'd let a cold fester and kept going to school even with a forty-degree fever. Apparently, he'd only attempted to do something about it because the school nurse had banned him from coming to class sick. Mitsuki arranged leave from work and helped nurse him back to health, to his great displeasure. By some miracle, Katsuki didn't actually remember the fight she'd been planning to discuss — he'd been halfway delirious. It was like the universe had protected Mitsuki from facing the shit she'd said to him that day, and "saved" her from addressing by far the worst fight they'd ever had, well, before he started his first year at UA.

She's not sure if she's grateful Katsuki never remembered, or if she wishes he did so they might have talked things out sooner. A part of her knows though, that her way of thinking back then was way off, and a talk didn't guarantee things would have been fixed. For all she knew, it could have ended up making things worse, in some parallel universe.

Not that it matters now. She'd messed up as bad and worse on many occasions following that, ones she knows Katsuki remembered.

Her phone ringing startles her. Inko's contact photo — her number had stayed on Mitsuki's phone even during the years their friendship

grew strained due to Katsuki — bounces around the screen. She swipes to answer.

“I’ve been ringing the doorbell for ten minutes. You are in, right?”

“I just parked. I’m heading up now.” She unclasps her seatbelt and swings the car door open, feeling a sense of déjà vu. They agreed to meet at noon for lunch, and she’s a quarter of an hour late. “Lost track of time.”

“I’ll be waiting up here,” Inko says, not making a fuss out of it, and Mitsuki switches the phone off.

Instead of heading straight for the elevator, she makes a stop in the mailroom and is disappointed to find nothing but bills and coupons in their box. No letters from Tsukauchi, no news.

Inko notices she’s out of it the moment they’ve sat down. Her green eyes become rounder and her face twists into an expression that makes Mitsuki want to cry.

“What’s wrong? Are you worried about Masaru?”

“No, we talked this morning, it’s… I was thinking about Katsuki.”

“Oh.”

“I feel like I’m still failing him, Inko. The detective told me announcing him dead wouldn’t mean giving up the search for him, but I haven’t gotten no news, none at all.” As a PR move, the death announcement was so effective she still feels guilty about it months later. Sure, there were naysayers, but their sales also went up by three hundred percent in the immediate aftermath, largely attributed to people who felt bad for what their family was going through and wanted to somehow show support. Considering she may as well have fed Katsuki to the League herself, she feels like she’s stealing from those people whenever they show up, playing the concerned and heartbroken parent she never was during Katsuki’s lifetime, or worse, profiting off her son’s trauma. The condolence messages are the worst, and the amount of times she's had to lie and appease people by saying meaningless saccharine crap like "We have to move on" and "Life faces us with difficult journeys." is disgusting. They don't make her feel better, they're so the person sending them can feel like they helped and did their good deed for the day. “Isn’t it weird that they’ve found nothing?”

Inko ponders the question, spinning her cup of tea in her hands. “When’s the last time you were contacted?”

“Never. And when I ask, they tell me they’re working on it and shoo me away.”

Her friend frowns. “I’d tell you what Izuku knows, but he clams up whenever I try to ask.”

“Izuku’s a kid himself, Inko. I’ve got actual adults on this job and they aren’t giving me shit. They won’t even tell me how they’re looking for him. I’m a person of interest in this whole ordeal. I deserve to know, don’t I?”

“You have the legal grounds to, as well.” Inko would know. She works at a courthouse.

“It’s driving me crazy.”

She’s got the rest of the day off, so when Inko leaves she begins to do research on how missing person investigations work, discovers the police are often incompetent as hell in regards to them and contemplates hiring private investigators. If Katsuki is still out there, she owes it to him to protect his interests, and the first step of that is finding him.

We’re meeting tomorrow, nine am sharp, clear your schedule, she texts Tsukauchi.

I have a meeting at that hour, the guy has the audacity to reply.

I don’t care, she texts back. *Nine am*

Not bothering to wait for a reply, she switches off the phone and falls into a restless sleep.

Police stations fucking suck. There’s always a stale, sleazy air about them, and they’re always teeming with corrupt geezers with massive sake bellies. She walks past metal-plated holding cells and glass partitioned booths and debriefing rooms with doors painted blue, the artificial lighting bringing her back to that day she walked the same path with Masaru trailing behind her. No one to keep her grounded today. She’s in this alone, and if it goes well, she’ll have only done minor property damage and absolutely no battery.

Hoping Tsukauchi's office is still in the same place, she knocks on the door once and slides it open without waiting for permission to enter.

Inside she finds Tsukauchi leaning on his cluttered little desk, conversing with All Might of all people. She pauses to stare at him unashamedly. It's weird seeing the symbol of peace this up close, and his skeleton reminiscent body only makes it weirder. From the way his shirt hangs as if his shoulders are a coat rack to his freaky height despite being seated, to the black holes with blue centers that are his eyes, it's hard to believe he's a live person and not a character ripped from a comic book.

"Bakugou-san," says Tsukauchi, a strained look on his face. "You came."

"I said I would, didn't I?" She makes a show of checking her phone, flipping it around to show the thin characters of her clock marking two minutes past nine am, then, she drops her purse on a file cabinet and sits down on the couch next to All Might as if she owns the place.

"Could you, uhm, wait outside a little while I finish up with All Might?"

"It's alright Naomasa-kun I don't mind—"

"No."

"Bakugou-san, I could have you removed from the premises by law—"

"I trusted you, detective, to be the sole investigator that would get me back my son. Do you think I'm stupid? You've refused to give me a single bit of news for months. I want answers. If I have to fight the whole police station to get them so be it. I thought you weren't one of the shitty ones but I was wrong. I guess you're as bad as the rest of them."

"You haven't told them *anything*?" All Might cuts in, an air of confusion heavy in his voice. The 'them' must refer to her and Masaru, and the way he says 'anything' carries the implication that there are a *lot* of things to tell. Her stomach drops, and her nerves begin to materialize as anger.

"What the fuck does that mean? What have you been keeping from me?"

"It's complicated," Tsukauchi breathes.

“So you *do* know something.”

His silence is answer enough.

“You know a lot of things.”

A car could run her over and she wouldn’t notice it that’s how much her mind clouds over.

“Tell me everything.”

Tsukauchi moves from where he’s leaning on his desk to sit down on his chair proper. *Wasting time*, Mitsuki thinks.

“As I said, it’s complicated. There are several reasons updates have been slow—”

“Slow?!” She stands. “Try non-existent.”

“Details of the case have been sealed by the commission, Bakugou-san. It’s classified information.”

Bullshit. “He’s my son, not a fucking state secret.”

The detective seems genuinely dejected, and he’s playing with his thumbs out of nerves. “I’m sorry. I wish it weren’t this way, but I don’t make the rules. We’ve been ordered to keep information in as small a circle as possible.”

“*I’m his mother*,” Mitsuki repeats, as if saying it over and over will convince the guy of how dumb keeping things from her is. “He’s a minor and I’m his legal guardian. I have a right to know.”

“No one is his legal guardian because he’s legally dead. And if that were to be revoked, guardianship of Katsuki would pass to the commission.”

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump, every second her heart beats two and a half times. Her feet move on their own to the front of Tsukauchi’s desk, her hands slam on its surface and leave palm-shaped smears of glycerin on impact. “*Why?!*” she demands.

“Calm down, Bakugou-san—” cuts in All Might, who’s stood up to close the door Mitsuki was petty enough to leave open and afford their screaming fest some privacy.

“Zip it stickman — Why do I not have custody of my son?!”

Tsukauchi gulps. “It’s not set in stone yet, but there are talks that the HPSC is planning to fight you over it, and they have plenty of grounds to have you declared an unfit parent based on things you’ve said yourself.”

Her hands tighten and she doesn’t miss the note of accusation in the detective’s voice.

“Leaving him home alone for forty-eight hours is enough to get you charged with neglect, much less taking trips for weeks at a time since he was a preteen. Every receipt is recorded, every two-way plane ticket for two people only that would let a legal team calculate easily enough how long you’d spend abroad or away while Katsuki stayed home unsupervised.”

“Parents are busy all the time,” she tries to justify, even though she knows it’s futile.

“Busy parents also hire childcare, or send their kids to boarding school.”

“He didn’t want to—” No. That’s wrong. Mitsuki could have made him. She forced him into all sorts of other things. But she hadn’t pushed that far, because it was their unspoken agreement that they’d stay out of Katsuki’s business if he behaved and made no trouble. With how often they fought, she’d thought leaving him alone and free of her was a *reward*. As if they were business partners and not a family. “Fuck.”

She lets go of the table and backtracks to sink into the lumpy couch. “But you’ve found him.” It’s the only small relief that this conversation has afforded her so far.

“Not quite.”

“Evidence that he’s alive then.” Why else would they be doing all this? “What does *the Commission* want him for?”

“I’m not allowed to say.”

“Fuck you.”

“If it were up to me I’d have told you since we received the first slip of information. But I’m bound to the law.”

“Fuck the law.” Her eyes shine with a feverish quality. “Break it. Right

here. Right now. Who the fuck cares? No one will know I know. I'm one person and I won't tell a soul. I won't even tell Masaru if it's this important to keep the secret. Just… tell me what happened to my fucking kid."

Tsukauchi sighs, and Mitsuki really wants to punch him.

"What's with your attitude? There are reasons you aren't telling me beyond this commission thing, aren't there?"

His lips purse and he appears to be debating something with himself, eyes occasionally flittering in All Might's direction. After far too long, he starts speaking again.

"This ban on information was only instated late last year. We had clues a little prior to that."

This hoe! He should have said that from the start! "Where the fuck are they?!"

The tension in the air is thick as the detective pauses to rummage for something in the file cabinets below his desk. A thick envelope of cream-colored paper is held in front of her. The room is small enough that she can reach over to grab it, its weight eerie on her fingers. The front is plain, while the back is stamped with a label.

Case No.3487 **Item** No.12 **Description:** Detailed report on League captivity and Nomu creation process by Bakugou Katsuki **Location:** Delivered to Midoriya Izuku's UA dorm room by Bakugou Katsuki **Lead Officer/Detective:** Tsukauchi Naomasa. There's a date too, which lets her know it was received in early December, of *last year*. Fucking ages ago.

Mitsuki's hands are shaking so bad she very near drops the whole envelope while trying to open it. Inside is another envelope, this one in a brown color, its top pried open with immaculate care, Deku scribbled on one side in what she recognizes to be Katsuki's handwriting, neat and evenly spaced. Her fingers linger on the text and she feels that familiar sting in her nose. Katsuki's *alive*. Alive and well enough to make reports. This thing she's holding had been in *his hands* at one point.

"I wouldn't recommend reading the content," Tsukauchi tells her, which only makes her want to read them more. "Or at least only do so at a moment you're sure you can handle it."

Fear. It hits her like a freight train whose tracks she'd refused to move away from despite hearing the warning honks from miles away. What's that supposed to mean?

"What's in it…?"

"Descriptions of how he was tortured."

Her mind comes to a screeching halt.

All of a sudden she wants to force the envelope through a shredder at once.

"Midoriya had it for a week or so before he brought it to me, and I had to spend the next week analyzing everything Katsuki wrote, so I didn't have the chance to tell you. By the time I got that chance, towards the second half of December, there was another development that got the Commission invested in the case and brought about the classification. I hesitated to tell you and your husband because the information was disturbing, and… Izuku said Katsuki was staying somewhere new and never intended to come back."

Tsukauchi assumed they'd be better off thinking their son dead and processing the grief than knowing he was alive and refused to come back. He had the chance to, and he chose not to use it. That's how bad he thinks of Mitsuki and Masaru. Izuku's words when they'd been here together last time spring into her memory. *I'm the one who knows Kacchan best. How will he feel when he sees that we stopped looking after less than three months? He'd never want to come back again. The whole reason we're here is that you gave up on him!*

I've failed again.

"Where is this place?" Is it safe? Is *he* safe? Does he have food and a bed and comfort? Is it better than her and Masaru and their apartment they'd never leave empty anymore?

"We don't know. He's hard to track and believe me, we've tried."

"You should have told us."

"I know. It was a mistake. I shouldn't have made the choice for you."

"What else happened to him?" The picture isn't complete. What does the Commission have to do with this? How is it even possible for a law enforcement organization to steal her kid? What do they want

him for? What's critical enough that requires her son's status be treated like a state secret? She has to know.

"I'm not allowed—"

"Please. I've been shitty about it but he's *my kid*. I should be protecting his interests." Protecting him. Failure isn't a word in Mitsuki's vocabulary. Sitting and crying on mistakes won't fix them. She has to get off her ass and do something. She can't be a crap excuse for a mother forever. "*Please*."

Another strange glance passes between the detective and All Might. The latter does a faint nod. Tsukauchi sighs for the millionth time that day.

"I'm sorry, but it can't be done. I can give you a photocopy of Katsuki's report if you'd like to read it, but that's all."

"But—"

"It's final, Bakugou-san." He shuffles some papers on his desk in a faux effort to look busy Mitsuki sees right through. "Now, I'll ask you to leave before I'm forced to escort you outside myself." *In handcuffs and to the holding rooms three doors down* is implied.

It's weird. All of it is outrageous and burocratic and stupid. Some dumbasses in mismatched and ill-fitting suits and ties who've never spoken a word to her son are entitled to more information regarding him than the person who gave birth to him? In what world?! Worst of all is Tsukauchi who, closed off and staunch and not the least bit accommodating, seems to her a drastic change to the guy he was when they last met.

Angry, frustrated, and guilty all over again, she huffs and stands up, making for the exit with harsh footsteps and sliding the door shut without saying goodbye.

She's made it out of the police station when someone taps her shoulder from behind and she turns to see All Might, of all people.

"Are you the symbol of peace or a street creeper?" Bakugou Mitsuki snaps, brushing away Toshinori's hand with the ferocity of a poorly contained storm.

Young Bakugou was her clone down to the last eyebrow twitch. It's

uncanny. Now that the woman's full attention is focused on him, Toshinori is finding it difficult not to shrink, or dip into the authoritative manner he uses when he feels like his authority needs protecting (usually against supervillains, or, as he's come to discover, disgruntled mothers). The truth is, Mitsuki is *intimidating*. Although he dwarfs her (not unimpressive) height, a single narrowing of those sharp eyes is making Toshinori feel small. There's this air of judgment about her, the atmosphere of a person who's used to getting what they want no matter how hard they need to fight for it. Despite the slight messiness of her hair (the type that's unintentional and unwanted), the faint sallowness of her cheeks (Toshinori owns several mirrors, and he's spent his life among selfless to the point of selfish heroes with savior complexes big enough to write five separate psychology doctorate theses on — he knows what someone who's taking care of themselves questionably looks like) and the dark marks under her eyes (she's done a good job of hiding them with makeup — a practice Toshinori also knows a fair bit about curtesy of all the commercials and PSAs he's had to star in over the course of his career) she's still perfect on the macro scale. Sleek, refined, "you'll give me what I want without me even having to ask for it" is her "vibe", as the Americans would say.

Said vibe has been made murky by the conversation he was an unfortunate bystander for.

"Bakugou-san," he starts. "I'd like to invite you for a coffee."

It's not what she was expecting, evidently, because her reddened lips fall into a gape.

"What the fuck?"

For being the type of teenager who he imagines would insist they despise their mother, Young Bakugou acts an awful lot like her. A lot of things about that boy have begun to make sense to Toshinori in this past year.

"The police station isn't a very pleasant or private place and I had a few personal things to discuss with you that would be better suited to a more relaxed environment."

"You, me, personal things… you don't mean…?"

Toshinori nods.

"Oh, *thank fuck*. Is that what those conspiratorial glances were about?"

The woman adjusts her small purse, a mix of relief, anticipation, and nervousness (well-disguised of course) coming about her.

“I was contemplating coming back here tomorrow with a baseball bat to beat that information out of Tsukauchi myself.” A polite chuckle escapes him, but he finds he can’t tell whether the threat is serious or not.

What a scary family.

“So you’re telling me my son lost his quirk, got caught and tortured a second time by the Yakuza, left the Yakuza boss a vegetable, kidnapped the little girl Yakuza boss had first kidnapped for bullet making purposes, paralyzed one of his goons, and… killed his righthand man while trying to escape, and may or may not been involved in that Tokyu Hands parking lot incident that’s been all over the news?” She pauses to breathe, looking faint. “He has weird powers that let him effect quirk factors while still being quirkless, allowing him to do things like force activate quirks or physically rip them away from their host? His blood is half nitroglycerin? His DNA is degrading? He’s got some sort of secret ability that’s allowed him to survive back-to-back near-death situations and everyone wants to know how it works, so that’s why the HPSC and half the villain underground are looking for him? That’s… I mean… All Might be honest have you gone senile.” She laughs a humorless thing.

“I’m not that old, Bakugou-san,” Toshinori says grimly. She’s handled it a lot better than he expected her to — only had to go to the bathroom to calm down once after Toshinori told her Young Bakugou had to become a murderer in self-defense. “Everything I’ve told you is real. All For One himself has placed a bounty on your son and his name has gained notoriety. Capturing him isn’t only a matter of material gain, for some, it’s become one of prestige and bragging rights as well.”

“…And the Commission? Aren’t they supposed to be heroes?”

“Many see it as a matter of public safety. They believe Young Bakugou could pose a threat if left to his own vices.” Unfortunate as it is for the boy, his kill count and the recent publicized incident have made this a very easy opinion to defend. “Also, the Commission believes his power could be harnessed and put to beneficial use if they could gain custody of him and train him.”

“They want to exploit him, basically,” Mitsuki says, her pallor still

unhealthy. “You expelled him from hero school and now you want to train him again, have I got that straight?”

“I don’t agree with the commission, Bakugou-san.”

“Yeah? What do you agree with? What skin have you got in this game that you’re sticking your neck out and telling me classified information? Which, how did you even get it, last I checked you were retired? Number one hero privileges?”

Toshinori frowns, answers mulling around in his brain. Guilt surrounding Young Bakugou has gnawed at him since the day he proctored the exam that got the boy expelled. He remembers hanging the Sports Festival medal on the boy’s bared teeth and telling him to smile as he fought against the chains keeping him tied to the podium. Never did he manage to say the right thing to Young Bakugou. *Someone at level zero will improve faster than someone at level fifty*, a little idiom Toshinori meant to use as encouragement, had been interpreted by the boy as “You’re not improving, while Midoriya is.” Young Izuku has told him, though, that Young Bakugou looked up to him as much as Izuku.

That scared Toshinori. Bakugou had scared Toshinori back then. If Izuku first reminded him of himself as a boy, with his unbending ideals and inherent need to *do good*, Young Bakugou was for Toshinori a twisted funhouse mirror. He was a manifestation of All Might’s traits, one where some of them were cranked to a degree that made them harmful. All Might always wins. All Might is a pillar that can’t be toppled. All Might doesn’t need sidekicks. All Might always saves the day with a smile. Except Young Bakugou had a battle grin that bordered on cheshire and terrifying, he embodied the lone wolf mentality to a point of preferring to strangle his team instead of working with them, and was prepared to break himself rather than lose or accept help in winning. In Bakugou, all the flaws of All Might as an ideal were amplified, attacking Toshinori in the face, blatantly accusing. How easy it is to go from pride to arrogance, independence to violent isolation, bravery to suicidal tendencies.

Slowly, through becoming a mentor for Izuku (*especially* Izuku) and teaching at UA (which allowed him to see the direct impact his image had on newer generations who looked up to him) he’s learned to see flaws that manifest with more subtlety. But Young Bakugou was the first and most obvious. He made Toshinori uncomfortable and Toshinori didn’t want to face that, so he tried to distance himself from that whole situation until it came to a head and Bakugou became a

victim of his unfinished fight with All For One.

“The villain who started all of this, All For One, has been my nemesis for decades, and the nemesis of my master before me. Your son was unfairly embroiled in that battle. He’s also the only person I know of, throughout these years, that has made it out of a direct one-on-one confrontation with All For One alive, bar myself. Not only that, but he managed to trick All For One in the process.”

He remembers it well, the foggy exterior of Tartarus, the tense exchange with the man Toshinori could say he despised with his whole being, the villain’s almost giddy, condescending insistence that Bakugou Katsuki was dead, he’d *felt* the ruined boy’s life give, and soon many more of Toshinori’s students and loved ones would follow.

Mitsuki stays silent.

“If he does know the secret to resisting that quirk, something no one has managed for generations, learning it would benefit me greatly. I want to end that fight.”

“So you want to use him too.”

Toshinori winces because it does sound like that, doesn’t it? He’s struggled with this a lot, hearing the HPSC’s plans for Bakugou’s future from Naomasa whenever the man has time to grab lunch and needs a place to vent. Bakugou’s behavior indicates he’s got no desire to return home ever again, never mind dip his feet back into heroism. Toshinori’s also been in the business long enough to know that, if Bakugou *were* found now, his thoughts on the matter wouldn’t matter. He’s done more than enough (whether in self-defense or not) to be lawfully labeled a criminal, and with both his original legal guardians compromised and one could argue abusive, the HPSC would have an easy time gaining custody. Even if say, he’s found after he’s of legal age, it’s guaranteed the Commission will push to have him deemed unfit mentally to make his own decisions and handle his own affairs, then assign themselves his conservators. Regardless of which side gets to Bakugou first, heroes or villains, his freedom will be at risk all the same.

And as much as Toshinori aches to save Bakugou, to give the boy a second chance and grant him happiness, if the fate of the world was on the line, if whatever secret Young Bakugou knows is the only hope they have left in destroying All For One as a quirk and the boy refuses to help, Toshinori can’t promise himself he wouldn’t side with the

Commission and force the methods out of him. Heroes have to make many tough decisions throughout their careers. If it's the future of the entire country or the stability of a single boy, with no way to ensure both, well…

No. It won't come to that, that much he's sworn to himself. Toshinori will find another way. One that saves everyone, and sacrifices no one. Not Young Bakugou, and not Izuku and future wielders of OFA either.

For what has to be the millionth time in his half-century-long life, Toshinori curses All For One. It all boils down to that bastard, in the end. If he'd never staged a kidnapping of the boy, none of this would have snowballed to such a degree.

"Talk," says Mitsuki. "Don't go all broody."

"His secret would be useful, yes, but it isn't my main priority. Right now, I care more about his safety, and the risks to that aren't coming only from the villain side. If he's found, he'll need people beside him that have his best interests at heart."

After that harrowing shitshow of a talk, Mitsuki doesn't know what else to do but head to the office, lock herself inside, and not come out for long enough that poor Tomoe starts worrying and questioning her wellbeing. Katsuki's current situation is somehow worse than being dead, and this day has been every aspect of exhausting. She's heartbroken, but there's also this new sense of purpose that's been born within her. Because Katsuki *is* alive. He *is* out there. Which means Mitsuki still has a chance to make things right, and one way to do that has presented itself at her doorstep. Fight for him. Speak up for him when he's not there to do it himself. If her son doesn't want anything to do with heroes or villains or hell, her, anymore, so be it. She'll respect that. Respect it and make sure that, when push comes to shove, none of these bitches get their dirty claws anywhere near him either. One day, when he's ready to see them again, she knows whose side she'll be on.

It's the reminder that Masaru is coming back tonight that has her leaving the two dozen half-finished sketches of cooky and disturbing designs she's cooked up as an outlet for everything to hurry back home.

Seeing Masaru's shoes at the genkan when she unlocks the front door sends a thrill through her, and she feels the coil of emotions that's been tightening all day begin to loosen violently. Her eyes are stinging

again, and she doesn't bother pouting to stop them.

The further she walks the more proof of Masaru's presence she finds — keys in the catch-all, his coat on its hook, a suitcase still packed and standing at the juncture between hall and living room, Masaru himself. She catches him in a hug that's more like a tackle and kisses his stupid face before he even has a chance to say hello.

"Honey, hey— what's wrong?" he asks, meeting her wet eyes with a concerned gaze. His glasses are slightly askew. She kisses him again just to make sure he won't disappear then melts against him.

"You know how the detective's been giving us nothing?" she mumbles. "How I talked about going to meet him?" She texted him about it yesterday. Masaru's body shakes as he nods. "Well. I went and asked like I said I would and… it's a lot."

Chapter End Notes

1. all the legal and financial bullshit in here is just that, bullshit, made up of half research half invention
2. what did you think of the memory sequence? i wonder if I had Mitsuki go too far, or if she was still believable
3. I'm anticipating much roasting in the comments
4. if you'll remember, way back in chapter one i talked about how katsuki took care of the house and made sure everything was always squeaky clean for when his parents were set to come back. the implication with this flashback is not just that he was sick, but that he hadn't anticipated for them to come back early, otherwise, he'd have cleaned up, pneumonia or no
5. I'm kinda worried the way i shoved all might in here is inorganic but i wanted to write a POV from him damnit
6. I like to imagine Mitsuki and Masaru as one of those disgustingly in love forever couples
7. i read the picture of dorian gray recently so if parts of this sound all flowery it's because everytime i write after reading an old English classic I start sounding like a bernadette banner rip off
8. I've had a lot of free time since I've been on break and I've been watching movies and binging every piece of media i can get my hands on. finally watched encanto and it was so fun.
9. cannot believe it's 2022 in like two days that's genuinely scary

Chapter 31: Interlude No.3: The Moon Shop

Chapter Summary

Catching up with Katsuki. The last of the interludes.

Chapter Notes

A little time skip happening here. Hope you guys like it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The smell of Taiyaki wafts through the air, mingling with that of coffee and spices and alcohol and large expanses of people. Noriko holds on to her bag tightly as she walks the alleys of Tsukino shopping district, the younger offshoot of Kyoto's famous Nishiki market. Her big bag with all her belongings she brought instead of luggage sits heavy on her shoulders. More crowds than usual have flooded the street because the Vernal Equinox happened to fall on a Monday, which means a long weekend, which means time to visit the family or take vacations to pretty places like Kyoto. Noriko was in the boonies of Kyoto prefecture for the latter, and now that she's thoroughly satiated by familial feels and annoying sibling energy, she's decided to swing by the big city for her last day off work.

Tsukino, like Nishiki, is an indoor marketplace, its narrow two to three-story shops forming alleyways covered by kaleidoscopic stained glass skylights of bright colors and patterns. Plants snake up the brick and wood facades, their flowers a week shy of full bloom. Although it's almost ten pm, the buzz has not lessened. It's trendy with the youth, this area; she's seen more than a couple groups of cackling high schoolers and tipsy college students passing by, bumping into her and other strangers by accident. Surely they're spent by the day's venerations and family reunions and memorial services, and they've hit these parts to let off a little steam.

Noriko is tempted to buy something from the many mouthwatering food options the endless stalls present her — warm and soft Taiyaki, Dango dripping with sticky glaze, crispy, piping hot Takoyaki arranged neatly in little brown paper baskets — but her mom also made sure to stuff her with every food available ("It's been months, Riko-chan!") including such a colossal amount of Botamochi she thinks thirty percent of her body might have become composed of the stuff and she's not sure her stomach has any more actual room left

inside.

“Where is this place…” she mutters to herself, as she reaches the end of yet another alley with no little doors in sight. Sighing, she pauses by a shop thinner than a meter selling silk woven scarves of every design and reaches into her pocket for a crumpled piece of paper. When uncrumpled, it reveals a poor excuse for a map, worse than her youngest sister’s worst drawings when said younger sister had been in kindergarten. It’s not wobbly or anything, no, it’s so neat and linear it’s scary, so laconic and sparse that it’s near impossible to decipher. Five straight lines of pencil and one guideline in bright red — that’s all it is, and it does not match in the slightest with this very gay marketplace. Noriko doesn’t need to look at it again, she had it memorized since the moment she first laid eyes on it some three weeks ago, but she still smooths it out and pretends, squinting at the lines through her glasses. It’s an excuse to take a little time to breathe, as well.

Busy places packed with information can be a bit much when your power is remembering everything you see so much as a sliver of.

“Excuse me,” she addresses the shopkeeper selling the scarves, an older lady who’s been eyeing her as long as she’s been eyeing the map. “I got this map from a friend but I have no idea what it means. I’m not from the city,” she explains and holds the paper up for the woman to see. “Could you help?”

After adjusting her spectacles, thrice as thick as Noriko’s own (that’s practically a full-on magnifying glass) the woman’s expression tightens. Her beady eyes scan Noriko’s form once more. “You’re lookin’ for the Gap, miss. What’s a young lady like yourself doin’ round there?”

The Gap, as it turns out is a more…shall you say, alternative aisle of shops nestled in the space formed between the outer walls of Tsukino and Nishiki. A half-meter crack marked by a curtain of neon beads in the very back of the tunnel between a pottery seller and a traditional garment store is the entrance. Beyond, the Gap unfolds into a burst of vivid phosphorescent movement — more people and more storefronts and more everything. Except the refinement of Nishiki and Tsukino and Kyoto the city is gone, has vacated the stage and allowed this loose twilight zone of music and the scent of danger to take the leading role.

No stained-glass skylights cover the Gap, only paper streamers and

strings of bioluminescent florals and dangling lanterns glowing cool reds and blues. There's this ethereal quality about the street, and the lack of bright lighting is mixing with the darkness of the night to form an atmosphere of eerie and surreal. The cobblestone itself is pitch black, clashing strongly against even her dark gray shoes and making her feel as though she's stepping on void. If there's an edge to the world, she's walking on it.

Clutching her belongings even tighter, she follows the red line that suddenly makes a whole lot more sense to a little door with an undiscernible color lodged on the second floor of a rickety two-story building with a tattoo shop on the bottom floor.

Open, informs the gorgeous lettering of the sign nailed to the said little door, written in some sort of neon ink, if the way it shines is any indication. Noriko rings the bell placed next to the door once, twice, three times, as they agreed, then takes a moment to cover her face with a plain black mask, tuck any stray blue curls into her hat, and step inside.

The interior is just as gorgeous as the exterior, a proper fairy tale apothecary bursting with amber jars and mysterious pots and rows upon rows of drawers with gleaming crystal knobs and glass and metal contraptions straight out of an alchemist's lab. It smells of herbs and mint and the unmistakable salt of the sea, and Noriko is enamored, instantly.

Her shoes glide on the polished hardwood floors as she's left marveling at the magical space. She's heard a lot about this place, from her own research, from Katsuki himself, but it didn't prepare her for getting to see it up close, for experiencing the wonder of a setting that would fit right in the pages of the *Spider Silk Chronicles*, her very favorite fantasy series.

"There's a line, girlie," says a rough voice, snapping her out of her stupor. Noriko blinks and sees a giant dude, ripped to a point that would make bodybuilders cry, front canines so elongated it would put a sabretooth tiger to shame, gazing at her with open contempt. She peers over his shoulder (or tries to, the dude is a behemoth) to see another figure sitting in a chair as they're tended to by a second person in head to toe black.

"Ah, sorry. Wasn't trying to cut in front of you or anything. Got lost in the moment and didn't pay attention to my surroundings—" Noriko rambles, stepping back so she's clearly in the spot behind him. Looks

like Katsuki is busy.

The man huffs but doesn't otherwise complain, turning back around, crossing his arms, and popping his hips in a stance of waiting.

Soon Katsuki is finished with the customer in the chair, and it's the big guy's turn. Seeing the kid interact with clients only solidifies the sense of surreal. Because if Noriko's memory weren't good enough that even the slightest similarity in speaking tone stuck out to her like a sore thumb, she would have in no world been able to make any connection between Bakugou Katsuki, and this guy in the moonlight blue mask.

His voice is smooth and low and even, his movements tinted with just the right amount of nerves, his disposition subdued and downright pleasant. It's *weird* with a skin-crawling sort of wrongness.

"I ain't know what that motherfucker mixed that ale with, but I ain't ever drinking with him again that's for sure."

"Could have been an accident. Depending on the type of yeast and how well it's brewed, there might have been traces of Maltocetamine in the final products. Most quirks hate that stuff," weird twilight zone Katsuki explains as he weighs out and packs two baggies, one of greenish powder and another of orb-shaped brown somethings.

"You looking out for that sleazy geezer?" says the giant dude, as if sharing some inside joke. "I ain't gonna rough him up or anything."

"He's a regular," Katsuki shrugs without looking up.

"Insatiable."

"Anyhow, mix a tablespoon of the powder with the same amount of water and take that after every meal tomorrow and it should neutralize the Maltocetamine. If it makes you queasy brew the pellets into a tea and that should fix it. They're meant for nausea in general, hangovers, food poisoning, that sort of thing, so even if you don't need 'em this time they're nice to have around. It'll be twelve hundred."

"You got it, Doc,"

"Don't call me that." And there's nothing really special in the way he says it — his voice is still that faux level manifestation of calm Noriko wants to scream at — but the sentence makes her hairs stand on end, and even the giant dude seems very eager to pay up and leave as

swiftly as possible once Katsuki's said it.

"Kid—" Noriko starts when the chime at the door has stopped pinging and the client is long gone. Katsuki brushes past her without replying to head straight for the front door, which he bolts from the outside and inside, then seals with a sheet of solid steel previously hidden behind one of the display cases that seems to Noriko the slightest bit overkill.

"Hey — whoa —" he drags her gently by the sleeves to the back rooms of the shop, which are a lot yellower than the blue-tinted main room, then steps out of his sandals and tears off his mask.

"Fucking finally," he says, and the familiarity of it makes Noriko relax. Now, *this* is Katsuki. "If I had to play nice to one more stupid dumbass I'd have committed homicide."

Tufts of pale gold bangs peek from the dark skintight cover that's over his head and neck, his freckles are more visible than ever against his slightly sunburnt skin, and his eyes are even paler than she remembers. But excluding the fatigue and the scars that are always going to be there, he looks okay, he looks like he's been eating decent and sleeping well and doing well and Noriko is so happy to see it.

"—I mean, I can't keep fucking defending his ass— stop staring —" Noriko sticks out her tongue and moves to take off her own shoes ignoring his muttering, "—overgrown five-year-old fuck—" Apart from hers and a couple of pairs she assumes to be Katsuki's, the genkan is lined with little shoes, pink and blue and a red so bright it hurts her eyes. Eri's.

"I brought Botamochi," she says and takes the cloth-wrapped bento full of them from her bag, presenting it to Katsuki, who looks utterly bewildered to be getting anything resembling a gift.

"Yeah, uh, thanks," he replies slowly, grabbing the bento and placing it next to the hallway's catch-all full of trinkets and keys and hairpins. "Go wait in the living room while I finish changing. I hate leaving shop shit out of order — Hey, brat, princess, get your ass down here and say hi to memory machine!"

Mumbling a quick sorry for the intrusion, Noriko tiptoes through the hall into the tatami-floored living room where the kotatsu (turned off) is laid out. The house is traditional, with *fusuma* and *shoji* screens forming the doors and walls and windows. In the living room, the south-facing screens have been removed, allowing a clear view of the

fairy light-lit yard outside that could by no means fit within the Gap. It's warm and humid and lovely. Katsuki did say the shop's main body is on an island way off Japan's actual coast and you get there through teleporting door magic, but, again, hearing about it and living it are proving to be very different things.

"My mom says thanks for the herb blend by the way. It cleared her lungs right up." Her eyes skim the living room's décor, the sketchbooks stuffed on the shelves, the displayed photographs of Katsuki and Eri and the largest cat she's ever seen, and that old lady that came to the library that one time. "I thought you didn't show up on photos."

"They're film," Katsuki yells from another room, and Noriko feels stupid for not having considered it herself.

Soon all of them, Katsuki, Eri, and their enormous cat who keeps throwing Noriko the dirtiest looks are right in the living room with her. "Why didn't you tell me you live in a Ghibli movie— and look at Eri-chan, so big, you've grown up a lot, is Katsuki feeding you well, do you need me to beat him up for you— I'll beat him up for you—"

"I'm fine auntie—"

"I'm not even thirty, oh my god, call me Riko!"

"—Riko-san."

"It's been way too long. I couldn't find time to visit earlier though, and I figured since it's going to be Katsuki's birthday soon."

The looks in the room make it very clear that this information was not exactly public knowledge, as even the cat appears to have turned towards Katsuki with a glare of betrayal.

"Wait, April twentieth, that's your birthday, yeah? You turn eighteen in a month, I know I'm right, c'mon."

"Kacchan you bitch," Eri breathes with an ease that should not belong to a seven-year-old.

"Fuck, no, yes?"

There's a loud crackle as the cat zaps Katsuki with a lighting bolt.

+ + +

Objectively, Katsuki has been having a nice time. A lot has changed since that week where his new life seemed on the brink of falling apart, what with Koharu's death and Todorokis being nosy and Aoi being a bitch and even the fucking HPSC being after him. His new life, as it turns out, did not fall apart. In fact, he stitched that shit back together, seam by seam, rip by rip, by the skin of his teeth.

Icy Hot's sister was easy enough to play. She's one of those fundamentally good people, those Deku-esque sunshine rays that have no business being that nice after all the bullshit they've been through. That worked in Katsuki's favor, especially because she felt extra bad that she'd lead Hawks to Katsuki when the guy was very much in on the whole torture this guy for our own benefit plan. He'd thought about pulling Eri from the school, possibly setting her up someplace abroad even, but the kid loved Fuyumi-sensei and the piano and her friends and their weird-ass stuffed animal principal, and Katsuki thought that the last thing she needed was her world overhauled again. Fuyumi was convinced to keep her mouth shut with some good old-fashioned guilt-tripping and the kid has had no troubles at school since, thank fuck.

Then, there came the issue of the Sun shop. Or issues, plural, rather. First of all, Healer Hag was gone, and she'd been the one to build ninety-nine percent of the customer base. Said customer base would have questions, lots of them. *Who are you? What are you? What are you called? What can you do? How do you do it? Where did the original clerk go? Why should we trust you? What did you do to her? Who says you're competent? She trained you? I don't believe it,* etc. This, on top of the Bakugou related speculations, like, *do you know Bakugou, or have you seen Bakugou, or have you helped Bakugou, or are you Bakugou, should I call the police?!* Not good. None of it.

And he couldn't use the aura ability directly anymore, either, lest he cut his life span even shorter. After the incident on recital day, his blood quirk levels had peaked at a whopping 11'000 AP, much too close to the estimated maximum of 13'500 AP or so for comfort, and his senses had dulled to a point where he had to add extra spices to his food separately because even the super spicy stuff both he and Eri used to love had become too mild to get a proper taste of. If he kept the Sun Shop going he'd need to answer too many questions that he never wanted to answer ever, but closing it was also a no go, one because it was Healer Hag's legacy, and two, because he needed to get money somewhere, and that chemical engineering degree required about four more years of mind-numbing work to be worth anything.

So, Katsuki settled for the easiest refresh one can hit. A rebrand. The Sun Shop became the Moon Shop, yellows were painted over with pale lavenders and blues, partial masks were replaced for full coverage skin-tight suits, word of mouth was swapped for fliers in the style Koharu used to make way back (he found copies of ones from twenty years ago in her office) and Katsuki went from bumbling mouthy assistant to charming second-generation owner with just the right blend of modesty and cynicism.

“This place has changed a lot,” old regulars would say, although he’d only really painted over a couple of spots.

“The original owner and her assistant clerk decided to retire,” he’d respond, keeping his voice so smooth it physically pained him. “I didn’t want to leave this place to rot and the original clerk had been my master for years, so I convinced her to let me keep running it. We go by the Moon Shop, now.”

They’d squint at him all suspicious and disbelieving and accept his explanations with hesitance. Business was slow in the first month following the shift. Coming to such a clandestine clinic had enough danger attached to it even when Koharu was the trusted source running it, now that a whole new guy was in the game with no word from the person who’d gained their loyalty, of course, people would be unsure. However, Katsuki had studied hard, and Koharu’s notes were good, which meant he was good, and people could see that. Soon, the story stuck, business was strong and even the internet had ceased talks of the frankly ridiculous notion that the Sun Shop was in any way connected to Bakugou Katsuki. Ridiculous, is he right?

“Eri-chan’s much more talkative, huh,” Noriko tells him, once the kid has gone to bed for the night and they’re left in the kitchen. Katsuki washes dishes (they’d made their own Botamochi because Katsuki thought Eri might like it — she did — some are still at Koharu's altar) while memory machine sits at the table and tries to pretend she’s not salivating over every crevice of Koharu’s magic house.

“School does her good.”

“How come you didn’t tell them about your birthday?”

“Forgot.”

She hums.

“I mean it. ‘S in a month to boot. Why would I remember that shit.”

“You’ll be eighteen. An adult.”

“A legally dead one.” He sighs. “Not like it matters much anymore.” Maybe it would have been worth something before he got kidnapped the second time, if he hadn’t committed all those actual crimes and only needed an excuse to be away from his parents once e decided to come back from the dead. But that didn’t happen, and now he has three secret identities, two false passports, and a handful of felonies as sprinkles on the misery cake. “They get to try me for kidnapping and obstruction of justice as an adult. Yay.”

“You’re a real ball of joy, Katsuki-kun.”

“I try.”

“Are you planning to live like this forever?”

“It ain’t exactly something to whine about,” he points out, referring to the pretty house they’re sitting in and the pretty shop in front of it and the cupboards full of food and closets full of clothes. He owns an entire island with a stupid amount of drugs of questionable legality in the attic, among other things. It’s a far cry from homelessness and a further cry from lamentable territory.

“I guess you’re right, but…” Memory machine trails off for a moment. “Isn’t it a lot?”

“Fuck it.” Yeah, it’s annoying pretending to be a spineless nerd for the first half of the day at uni, having to raise a seven-year-old, maintain the house and study until his eyes melt for the rest of the day, and then run the Moon Shop every three nights, but what other choice does he have, exactly?

He can’t drop the business because it’s the easiest way to make money, he can’t drop Uni because he’s got no idea how long Koharu’s portals will last despite her promise of decades — they could break at any moment — leaving him jobless, and if he doesn’t finish Uni, job prospect less. Trade school was an option, but it would be just as physically taxing as chem engineering, never mind stereotypes. He can’t stop taking care of Eri because he’d rather die than break that promise, and he can’t go home either, because he killed Nemo way back and he turns into a magic ghost zombie people would love to put under a microscope when murdered.

Hawks the chicken fucker was useful for a couple things, one of which was learning the HPSC’s plans, and they were not plans Katsuki

wished to touch with an extra-long pole vault. So yeah. Hiryo Shin for the rest of his life it is.

“I think you’ll burn yourself out,” Noriko says, unfiltered.

“I think you should shut up.”

“Mhm. I’m happy you’re okay at least.”

Using a dishtowel, he wipes the last of the cups. “Yeah. What is it now, five months without getting kidnapped? I should hold a celebratory party.”

“Don’t jinx it.”

Only dumbasses let themselves get overconfident.

“You should get home. It’s past midnight. You got work tomorrow.”

“But—”

“You’ll be able to visit my Ghibli house again.”

“But—” The grown woman has the audacity to pout. *Pout.*

“If you make that face for two seconds longer I’ll punt you into the ocean and let you drown without anyone ever knowing.” Fun part is he could actually do it and have a ninety-nine percent chance of getting away with it.

“…You’re scary.”

+ + +

He warps her back to Tokyo with one of the portals he’s set up in a discreet cranny of Shinjuku station since she had all her bags with, and Katsuki needs to be in Tokyo for other reasons.

To be specific, he’s meeting a certain Chicken in a slightly unsavory bar in Ikebukuro, the type with private rooms whose servers keep their mouths shut. Katsuki’s gotta make a little bit of a showing as Static today in the nearby public bars too, which is why he agreed on the spot in the first place.

With the shop settled and academics dealt with, what was left was Static. Katsuki decided that he didn’t really mind people thinking Katsuki was Static, the Commission, even the UA fucks most definitely

knew, and the public didn't matter much. The issue was with people connecting Static to the Moon shop. Because not even Chicken knows about that — no one apart from memory machine and a couple of healer hag's pesky family members knows. That's why he decided to keep making one-off showings as Static, his face covered with a scarf but his hair showing to match his description on vigilante watch websites, in the social joints he knows get frequented by vigilantes or low rate villains he's come to learn about from shitty small talk with shady customers. He never loiters, only passes through long enough for people to see him in the corners of their eyes and later think, *wait a minute.* Occasionally, he'll prevent a petty crime (because trouble comes to him, he doesn't need to go looking) that'll get him caught on cameras, far away from the Moon shop's location, and that's as far as it goes.

"You're late," Chicken tells him when Katsuki has slid shut the door of their booth.

"Oops." He takes his time sitting down, just to annoy Hawks that much more. Does Hawks have Katsuki's life at the tips of his fingers? Yup. Does he have more of a guilty conscience than he lets on? Also yes. Match made in heaven. For Katsuki that is. There's not going to be a repeat of the theatre ever again if Katsuki has anything to say about it. "What the hell d'you want me for this time?"

"The League—"

"Nope."

"Bakugou—"

"Nope."

Hawks rolls his eyes. "*Katsuki.* Once Shigaraki's upgrades are complete, no one will be able to stop him without finding a way to dismantle his quirk."

"Having a hard time understanding how I fit into this equation, *sensei.*"

"You're living proof of resistance against All For One."

"And I don't fucking know how I did it," Katsuki says, for what he feels is the millionth time. Hawks stares like he doesn't believe it for the millionth time. "Big potato man tries to take my quirk, I say no and tug back at big potato man, big potato man is all 'you're a dud'

and skewers my guts. You're welcome to recreate that. Maybe grab a couple of UA freshies, let em piss in a hole for a month, then stick em in All For One's cell at Tartarus and see how they fare."

"Why can't you take this seriously?" Hawks tells him, a tint of frustration in his tone. "We're talking millions, hundreds of millions of lives at risk."

"I ain't the hero, you are. You and the rest of your buddies."

"So it's a spite thing? You're still childish about being expelled?"

Katsuki feels anger and anxiety hot on his neck. "Fuck no. That's ancient news. I'm saying people didn't want me in the hero biz for a reason, and now that I don't wanna be in it either, you can forget about it. I got nothing to do with that shit anymore."

"You could save the world."

"By doing what? Throwing myself at Hands when he comes out of his cocoon with his shiny new upgrades and praying I can rip his quirk off before I get dusted?"

"It worked with Overhaul."

Goosebumps on his skin, Katsuki's voice comes out more strained than he'd have liked it. "Stop mentioning shit you know nothing about."

The number two groans, leaning back into the cushions of his sitting area and downing a half-full glass of sake. Katsuki hasn't touched his own food. "You're our best shot."

"You've got to be a real sad bunch if that's true."

"For fuck's sake."

"I don't know what the fuck you expect me to tell you," Katsuki bites out, irritated. "You said you hated the Commission, but here you are trying to convince me to do the exact same shit they want me to do, only nicely?"

"They're right about you being useful." As if he's laundry detergent or a screwdriver. "Doesn't mean I agree with their methods."

"My answer is no."

"It's the wrong one. If you agree, I'll take you under my wing. Once

we've taken down the League, doing something that heroic would look fantastic at your trial — the public would be on your side, the jury too, anything you've done—"

"And you've framed me for to save your own ass," Katsuki interjects.

"—would be easily forgiven. You could go back to your old life."

"I don't *want* my old life." Why does everyone think that? "I want a quiet life for me and m— the kid. That's it."

"That can't happen after everything."

"Because *you* won't let it."

"Because *we* have a duty."

"*You're* the hero. *You* have the duty. I don't owe anyone jack shit." Deku himself would need to ask to get Katsuki to lift a finger to fix this mess. "Imagine going up to a random civilian and insisting they throw themselves at the biggest bad guy in existence because they might have a chance of hitting them in the head and killing them."

"You're not a random civilian, and your chances are a lot higher than a shot in the dark."

"I'd die. Even if it worked." Katsuki's explained the quirk soul ghost situation to Hawks before. Something as big as tearing apart the entirety of All For One (he remembers that eldritch mass of an aura very well), twice, or however many times that bastard made copies of it, might even detach his soul completely before he's finished, and then, he's not sure what happens.

"It's not guaranteed. Plus, you're okay with that, aren't you?"

Katsuki blinks, incredulous. Then he laughs.

"Oh, man. 'It's okay if you die, you're suicidal anyway.' Oh wow. All those villains you've been hanging with have rubbed off on you, huh."

"I didn't." Aw. Hawks looks like he really regrets letting that slip. "I didn't mean it like that. I'm sorry."

Katsuki waves him off. It's not that he's suicidal. He's ambivalent? Life isn't particularly *appealing*, but he also doesn't think he'll be throwing himself at traffic like his hag always wanted any time soon. There's a bit of silence until Katsuki says, "Yeah, well, it ain't only me I'm

taking care of, that I have the luxury of kicking the bucket."

"You know there are plenty of people out there more capable of taking care of Eri than you."

What a rude fucker. "I promised."

"It isn't healthy to live for the sake of other people."

"You my therapist now? Last I checked they try to convince you *not* to die."

"Look. My concern is that the world as we know it will end if we sit around arguing, one of our weapons could be you, and if *when* it comes down to it you refuse to help, everyone will die, including Eri. If you collaborate, meanwhile, our chances would majorly increase, and we could all come out of it in one piece, with you cleared of all charges on top of that."

"I don't want to help you," Katsuki insists.

"You're scared, aren't you." The number two hero's glare makes Katsuki stiffen. His hands are starting to shake, so he hides them by leaning back. "You're too scared to face Shigaraki or All for One or any of the League again after Kamino."

"Or maybe," he bites out, desperately trying to get the images flashing in his brain to stop. "I'm tired of being treated like a *fucking tool*. Ever thought of that?"

"No one has—"

"No, no. I mutilated and incriminated myself to set your useless druggie friend free after the fucker wrecked me, then I agreed to give you medical shit so you could get on Todoroki fucking Toyota's good side, who, if I gotta remind you, also helped torture me, and wants to barbecue your precious idol Endeavor alive—" Hawks winces. That had been *a day*. They'd met at Dagobah in Musutafu.

+ + +

"You're telling me you want me to help you heal *that bitch*?"

"Yes." Hawks said, not taking his gaze away from the ocean. "If you're connected to the Hiryos, you must know people with strong healing quirks."

“Your balls are colossal. If it’s between Todoroki Toyota and the electric chair, I’ll pick the latter gladly.”

“Todoroki Toyota?” Hawks looked perplexed, and that had been enough for Katsuki to realize the chicken wasn’t privy to what he was privy.

“You don’t know, do ya?”

“Know what?”

“Dabi’s Endeavor’s long lost oldest. Endy abused him so hard he went loony. That’s what he did to his wife too — you know she’s been stuck in a mental hospital on his word for years, yeah? Tried to make a brat with an overpowered quirk using eugenics because he’s jealous of All Might. First three attempts weren’t good enough for him, then IcyHot became his masterpiece. C’mon.” Hawks had been gaping, a hardness covering his eyes. “I’ve seen enough news to have noticed you hang around him all the time, and you knew Todoroki’s sis too. Couldn’t you tell Icy Hot hates Endeavor’s guts?”

“I… I thought it was a teenage rebellion thing.”

“Nope. It’s an Endeavor is a piece of shit thing.”

“But… Todoroki-san moved in with Natsuo and Fuyumi right after Endeavor-san battled the high-end Nomu… though Endeavor-san doesn’t live with them… *oh.*”

“Yeah… *oh.*”

A wave crashed loudly with the shore, completing the soap opera scene.

+ + +

Katsuki ended up giving in and helping with a little bit of Aoi's quirked water and some graft creams. Mostly for the sake of Todoroki's sister, who he felt bad for. She's one of those everything is fixable types. Might as well give it the best chance of working.

“—Now I gotta become a martyr because you and the rest of the heroes are incompetent. That’s not being treated like a tool?”

“*It could save the world.*”

“Man, fuck that.” He takes a deep breath. “What I did back then — it

was a fluke. My entire existence right now is a fluke. Don't hang your hopes for the world on a flimsy fluke. If you wanna throw yourself at Hands and get shredded, be my guest. If you want to save the world, be my guest. Leave me and my new life and my family out of it. Having a fancy power doesn't mean I gotta go playing with fire. I tried and got burnt. Multiple times. I gotta stop at some point."

"That's your final answer?"

"A thousand times yes."

"I'll look at other options then."

"You do that."

+ + +

When he steps into the westmost branch of Kitsune Club at three am, he's still uneasy from his talk with Hawks an hour earlier. The chicken knows how to get under Katsuki's skin, and that ever-present current of anxiety he tries to keep suppressed is leaking and overgìflowing at the seams. He contemplated skipping, but this is Static's last planned appearance in a while, perhaps for good. Safe to say he should have listened to his gut, which has by now become a top-grade bullshit and bad luck detector, but no, here he is instead, cornered in a back alley by a bunch of dumbasses.

"You're a real hotshot, eh?" says who he presumes to be the leader of this little gang, a pudgy dude with the horns of a bull and a dirt-soiled suit. "Walking through the club every other week like you're untouchable. It drives me fucking mad."

Katsuki reaches for the two knives in his back pockets, eyeing the auras of the three assailants as they mix with each other due to their proximity for any clues. "That's great, gramps—"

The first hit comes unexpected, and it stings in a way that reminds him of that lady called Maki with the iron fists from the first time he got cornered in Tokyo, one half of the duo who'd ratted out that he was alive at all and caused at least half of his problems. Shaking his head, he begins to dodge their hits and focus on the wall behind them, calculating a path that he can use to scale the building and parkour his ass out of here without having to permanently mutilate anyone today.

Then, dirty-suit says, "I heard you have a thing for being restrained.

Maybe I'll tie you up with your own scarf and have a good look at your pretty face—" and that thing he said about not mutilating anyone today? It flies out the window faster than Satsu's mood swings. Bakugou Katsuki's serious street fight career can end like it started, with a shitty back alley scuffle, made even shittier by the fact that he's trained enough by now that these idiots are no match.

He heaves in the corner of the alley half an hour later, when he's done, swallowing familiar curds of guilt and disgust and regret, then calls Hawks, who shows up to find the three dumbasses pinned to the alley's walls at various heights by their undergarments, alive but stabbed *a little more* than strictly necessary.

"I ain't the guy you want saving the world, number two."

Chapter End Notes

1) What do you think?
2) Do the new developments make sense?
3) Taiyaki, Dango and Takoyaki are common Japanese street foods.
4) As I understand, equinox days are national holidays in Japan. The date for this chapter is 21st of march, because that's when the vernal equinox falls this year. That means it's been almost two years since Katsuki's first sports festival *wink wink*
5) i watched when marnie was there today, hence all the extra ghibli mentions (side note and spoilers, i hope I'm not the only one who got severe lesbian vibes from marnie and anna only to be disappointed because marnie is anna's fucking dead grandmother TT)
6) i hope i haven't forgotten how to write katsuki
7) i almost think i made him too dark? idk
8) the vernal equinox is also a day where it's common to hold memorial services or clean up the graves of family members, and botamochi are a traditional treat prepared for the occasion. i urge you to look it up because it's really interesting
9) kitsune, for the name of the bar (and it's a bar like the one the league had in kamino, not a nightclub despite the club in the name) comes from the yokai.
10) we are two chapters away from the motherload
11) what do you think katsuki will end up doing?
12) i recently read books one and two of the scholomance trilogy by naomi novik and the mc of that reminded me of the way i write katsuki sm sometimes
13) nishiki market is a real place in kyoto, while tsukino is one i

made up for the sake of the story

Chapter 32: UA's Seventy-fifth Anniversary

Chapter Summary

Eri wants to go to a festival

Chapter Notes

I'm so nervous you wouldn't believe.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A pretty day in April. Three days since Katsuki turned eighteen. The birds are chirping. The sun is shining. The fresh sea breeze makes the shop a dream to work in. It's too good to be true.

Eri comes home looking… suspicious. To make it easy for her to go to school, they've got a permanent pocket entrance set up in Musutafu, a few blocks down from the school and closer to Katsuki's old hang-out grounds than he would have been comfortable with a while back. It's crazy to think that the kid has already attended Minami Early for over a year, and will soon need to transfer to a regular public school. That on its own is a headache he doesn't want to think about. Getting back on track, the pocket entrance means Katsuki doesn't always need to pick her up, specifically when she and her friends want to walk home together. Today is one of those days. Katsuki is off from class, so he's waiting at home when she stumbles through the exit placed at the end of the hall, in a line with all their other passages. Her cheeks are flushed with excitement and her eyes are doing that baby-Deku reminiscent (Katsuki never had much contact with kids prior to Eri, and baby Deku is a frequent subject of his nightmares, so the comparisons spawn themselves) sparkle.

"Okay, what's going on?" he asks when she's practically dancing as she shoves a slice of meat from the Sukiyaki pot straight into her mouth. It's a little warm to be having hotpot, but the mushrooms they keep in the greenhouse Eri uses to train her quirk got a little overgrown, and this was the most hassle-free way to eat them.

"Mhm," she says, picking up a bit of tofu before she's even done with the meat in her mouth.

"Chew before you swallow kid. And slow down." He feels like a disgruntled parent and he's not even pissed off about it. What is life.

“This is really good, Kacchan.”

“…Yeah? Good enough to dance over?”

“I’m not—” She pauses to take a sip of water. “—dancing over it.”

“This ain’t dancing?”

“Not over the food.”

“Over what then— hey, I didn’t mean you should get the fuck up—” Pacifying himself with a tasty piece of mushroom, he tries his best to keep his nerves under control as he waits for her to return from, presumably, her room.

She’s got her entire school bag in toe, rummaging through it.

“You know the rules about getting up in the middle of eating.”

“We don’t,” she mumbles. “But this is important.”

Katsuki keeps his expression carefully neutral, and when she smooths out a crumpled sheet of paper to hand him, he sets down his chopsticks and takes a look.

Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Fest says the flier, in bold, angular lettering. The graphic on the front features UA’s signature H-shaped main building, its left side of skeletal scaffolding blending into its finished right side of glass and steel to symbolize the passage of time. Katsuki’s heart drops, but there’s no longer a fight or flight response when he sees UA-related anything, just a dull sort of ache. It’s hard to lose all your feelings for what had once upon a time been a ten-year-long dream, no matter what bullshit it ended up causing.

“I know you don’t like UA that much— but it’s a special festival, like a *big* festival with *floaties* and *tents* and *stands*— um… they’re mixing the sports festival and clu-cultural festival into one, because it’s an annise —anniversary, and Suzu-chan said she might be going, and it’s Deku’s last year, and I want to see him fight up close and—” The flier lets Katsuki know of all this and more “— please Kacchan can we go?”

“Where’d you get this?”

“Fuyumi-sensei had some because her brother is competing too,” she explains in one breath. “*Please* can we go?”

“Ok.”

“Please can we— wait, really?”

He nods, not trusting himself to speak without betraying the conflicted emotions whirring within him.

“Thank you thank you thank you thank you,” she chants, rushing over to crush him into a hug. He pats her hair and lets her happiness wash away his doubts.

“Now sit back down and eat. Those veggies aren’t gonna finish themselves.”

+ + +

“I know it’s dumb,” he tells Koharu’s photograph later that night, during that pocket of free time between Eri going to sleep and the Moon Shop needing to be opened. “And risky.” So many people at UA could end up recognizing him, it’s not even funny. And the freaks wouldn’t let Katsuki hear the end of it if they caught him. Since crime rates have been going stupid these last two years, their background checks for attendees will probably be crazy too. They could sneak in, but he wants Eri to get the proper experience, the one he always wanted as a kid but his parents never bothered to make time for, not the *I might go to jail if the guy from the popcorn stand realizes who I am so I gotta watch from the cracks between the nosebleeds* experience. “But the brat wants to go.”

He sighs, sinking to the floor and holding his forehead against his bent knees to ground himself. Koharu’s office has become his since he first opened it the day of her funeral, but he hasn’t done much to rid it of her memory. The drawers are still organized in the arbitrary ways she loved, the pictures she put up are still on the wall, even her pens (those of them that still have ink) he’d kept in their cup and continues to use. Turns out healer hag wasn’t lying when she said there was a lot of shit in here. From deeds to receipts to notes of regulars and their preferences to details on deals with suppliers to that thick notebook of favors. When you’re good at what you do and willing to offer shit a couple pale shades of illegal, you make a lot of connections in both high and low places, and the majority of those connections were transferred right over to him.

“I have a bad feeling, healer hag, I don’t know.” The incense he’s lit

clogs his nose. Her picture stares at him, and her urn too, neither able to offer any sort of advice. “My bad feelings are always right.”

A part of him has begun to regret brushing off Hawks with so much finality the last time he and the chicken met. Katsuki should have led him on a little longer. Now he’ll need to get all his information directly from his clients, and that’s a pain in the ass not because it’s hard (with this place being a sanctuary for the lawless at its core, and the whole magical aesthetic, people tend to forget that Katsuki is in fact a real person with a real-life outside the twenty hours a week the shop stays open, and not just a convenient drug dealer who stops existing when he keys the shop closed. People feel safe. People don’t think he’s got any reasons to spill their beans or *anyone* to spill them *to*. As his first kidnapping experience taught him, people love to share secrets when the perceived risk of doing so is close to zero. Hero, vigilante, righteous villain, the occasional crappy, actual villain that manages to slip through the cracks, hasn’t gotten the memo of who Katsuki serves (No, he won’t tell you what chemicals are needed to disintegrate a dead body with no residue. Ninety-nine percent of the time.) or that he doesn’t deem worth the hassle of kicking out… no matter who it is, with enough subtle prying, all the information he could ever need comes loose.) It’s not hard, but it is annoying. Having to act. Having to pretend. At least with Hawks, Katsuki could curse the guy out as he pleased. Birdie would still surrender updates. At work, he has a persona.

“Why do I make things hard for myself? Huh?” No one answers him. Satsu ain’t even here to meow. “It’s not like I want shit to be hard, and maybe I am kind of a coward, all cooped up for two years, but… I don’t got the energy, healer hag.”

The festival is this weekend. He’ll need tickets, good ones, and figure out a way to avoid the pesky screening process.

Back and forth, he taps his forehead gently on the hard pads of his knees. His body is always numb, so said gentle tap might seem a bit rough to other people — he can’t feel it otherwise. Sometimes he’ll become acutely aware of how much of his ability to perceive has been lost to whatever this disconnected soul situation is and it’ll freak him the fuck out. He won’t be able to go to sleep, because irrational anxiety that his soul will disconnect for good and he *won’t* wake up will overcome him, and then what happens? Weird limbo world forever? Peace? Hell? God knows. And he’s not even religious.

From his pockets, he grabs one of his smaller butterfly knives, and

pricks the very tip of his finger, like one would to collect blood for a blood sugar test. Immediately, the stuff beads toxic red against his paper skin. It's so neon it makes him feel like it'll melt the floor if he lets it drip. How his cells are still getting oxygen, he's got no idea, because this stuff smells much stronger of pungent sweetness than the iron of hemoglobin. Staying on his knees, he reaches for the quirk level meter he keeps in one of the room's many caddies, spilling a million other things in the process of opening the drawer. "Might as well check," he mumbles, and saturates the swab at the front of the device with blood until it beeps. As he waits, he sucks on the pricked finger — a useless habit that supposedly gets bleeding to stop quicker but only succeeds in proving that the shit's more nitro than blood.

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"Crap." Flinging the machine back in its drawer in frustration, he goes back to sitting in front of Koharu's shrine. "I ain't even using the aura manipulation. This is some bullshit. Isn't it bullshit?"

No one answers. For a little bit, he allows himself to rest in silence.

"Whatever." He's late for opening time anyway.

+ + +

"Starting next month, try to stay inside, Moon-san," says Hanemiya, one of his regulars, as she picks up her usual package Katsuki prepared in advance.

"Do you assume I go outside?"

She snorts. "Keep it in mind anyhow."

"Why?"

"You don't know? About next month?" She says next month like *Next Month*, like some sort of codeword. Beneath the mask, Katsuki frowns. He says nothing.

"No..? Damn…That idiot must have been making crap up again…"

"That'll be six thousand." She always gets a lot of shit at once, for her buddy Crawler too, this creepy twiggy guy who's one of the few

weirdos out there with a hero complex comparable to Deku's.

"Yeah… two seconds… you haven't heard anything for real?"

Katsuki accepts the money without replying.

"Right. Thanks a bunch, Moon-san."

"Have a nice night." *And get the fuck out of my hair so I can think.*

With a jingle of the door's chimes and mumbles of *untrustworthy assholes,* Hanemiya is out the door and gone.

In truth, Katsuki does know of a couple of things happening next month, the most prominent of which being the deadline for Hands and the completion of his fancy upgrades – mid-May, as Hawks reminded Katsuki a million times. But that's not his business.

He brainstorms ways to procure tickets until the chimes ring again and the next customer shows up.

+ + +

"Yeah, dude, Destro's selling like *shit* grenades. Because they're shaped like little turds, dude. You know, the emojis?"

"Fascinating," Katsuki says, wishing very much he could strangle this bastard who keeps walking into his store. The amber bottles of powder clink as he places them on the worktop. It's tea powder. A special blend of matcha and something Koharu liked to call 'star spice' (no, it's not pharmacist lingo for cocaine or any drug of that sort, it's a non-addictive calming herb that stimulates your back in star-like patterns).

"Dude," says the client after sniffing the mouth of the bottle and capping it back up. "Are you sure you don't got any… like… good stuff?"

One day, Katsuki will kick this guy out of the store.

"All those drawers and none of them got a blunt or two?"

Weed is utterly outdated in this day and age, and although they've got

stocks of everything, everything meaning *everything*, marijuana included, Katsuki stays away from selling or even looking at the addictive drugs that ruin your life more than they fix it, the type people take for "fun". He's tried all of them, he has blood tests from when Koharu first found him with traces of Fentanyl and Heroin and Rocuronium and Succinylcholine and Ecstasy and three dozen other quirk related drugs the doctor loved to pump him with, and he's been hairs away from adding addiction to his long list of problems, it didn't happen only because the doctor didn't want it to, and later, because whatever Koharu healed him with flushed his system clean.

He'll satiate himself with his anxiety meds and stop it at that. He's not about to get other people addicted either. Especially since possession of even the mildest crap like weed can get you up to five years in the slammer, and his estimated prison sentence is getting too long to be completable in one lifetime, much less one as flimsy as his.

"Dude… you should totes carry some. That's where it's at. Vintage, you know? Play like the quirkless kids—"

"Get out of my store."

+ + +

The night runs and runs, customers come in droves, darkness bleeds into dawn. As happy as he is to have made a fuck ton of money by the time morning hits and he's closed for the night, he's not happy about the sheer amount of clients showing up, especially those looking for first aid. Their society keeps getting more and more dangerous, and something's bound to tip over.

Not that any of that concerns Katsuki.

He's lost. He doesn't want to go through with any of the ideas in his brainstorming list.

1. Show up to the ticket booth and buy tickets. (What if someone he knows is manning the booth, what if there are problems with his documents?)
2. Procure VIP tickets from someone else (VIP stadium tickets means sitting in the VIP section with the relatives of his old classmates, higher likelihood of running into teachers.)

— Todoroki's sister (He remembers from first year that every student has a right to only two VIP tickets. That's not enough for Todoroki's family, let alone them plus Katsuki and Eri. On top of that, Todorokis suck and he refuses to ask them for help.)

— Call Deku (Deku's phone number, the one Deku forced Katsuki to punch into his shitty flip phone November of two years ago, is scarily clear in his mind's eye even now, but… no. Katsuki doesn't want to see Deku, Deku probably doesn't want to see Katsuki. How would one begin to address that conversation? *Hey, it's your ex-bully I need some festival tickets for that kid I kidnapped before you could save her?* No guarantee Deku wouldn't set a trap and ambush Katsuki into "coming home" either.)

— Contact Kirishima (Similar issues as contacting Deku, but Katsuki doesn't even have a phone number as a reference point)

— Corner a UA freshie and solicit them (Pain in the ass. Tickets not guaranteed. Illegal.)

1. Make fake tickets (High risk, difficult to do with UA's tight security measures.)
2. Sneak in. (Possible and downright easy with his no quirk energy teleport pockets combo, not the ideal experience for the kid.)

He thinks, and thinks, and thinks, names the operation *Infiltration UA* in his head, spends half his uni day scribbling illegible mind maps of the pros and cons of every plan, and finally comes to a conclusion around the time the seminar he has to attend ends. Dodging attempted small talk from his overly friendly classmates, he heads for the payphone outside campus and flips through the card booklet in his pocket for the number he needs.

+ + +

Photo fraud picks this cute little teahouse in southern Tokyo as their rendezvous point, and Katsuki finds him nursing a cup of nearly empty earl grey. "Tickets," he says, laying the precious slips of paper on the dark wood table. "No problems."

Buying the tickets straight up using their new identities is what Katsuki decided on. Simple is best. It was as simple as making a phone

call and handing over a copy of identification documents. Having photo fraud be the one to buy the actual tickets meant that the guy's quirk would take care of suspicion on the part of the clerks if there was any at all in the first place. A little more expensive than doing it himself, but worth it for not having to go near UA. Figuring out the logistics of bank accounts and credit cards and buying the tickets online was too much of a hassle.

"Trust my documents."

Their fake names are stamped in clear print on the two glossy tickets, decorated with all sorts of bullshit, visible and invisible, to make them harder to forge. Katsuki doesn't need to do that. Because he's got genuine fucking tickets. The kid's going to ascend.

+ + +

Logistically, crowds are a good thing. Crowds are wild, messy, frenzied, hard to control and regulate, a piece of cake to use and manipulate. Few will pay attention to you when nothing about you is noteworthy and there are a million other nerds to pay attention to. You can sneak into shit by hiding between stampeding idiots, you can crouch and be disguised by thousands of other bodies, forgotten in a sea of humans. If you're trying to blend in, crowds are a godsend.

But, crowds are also loud, smelly, and stress-inducing. Even at his most superficial and attention-seeking, Katsuki never liked crowds. He pushed through them with practiced and faked indifference, inflated himself to make everyone else, no matter how large in number, seem small and insignificant by comparison. Add to that brand new (or improved) aversions to touch, anxieties, and the ability to see the aura of every single person there, mixing and blending and clashing and hurting his fucking eyes, you've got a recipe for something memory machine likes to call sensory overload.

Being ten am, the ticket booths have been open for two hours when they arrive, but the lines haven't thinned nor shortened by much. So many fucking people are here, a lot more than he remembered there being as a first-year, though back then he'd been the one who felt larger than life, so maybe it's a matter of perspective.

There are moving vendors selling food and hats and useful trinkets by

the front of the school gates, everything from sunscreen to knockoff All Might stuffed toys. Eri holds his hand tightly as voices filter into their ears all around them, mothers complaining about unruly children and hero fans trading cards or making bets on the festival standings.

Eri asked herself to wear her special gloves, even though she's doing a good job of keeping her quirk under control, and they used up most of her built-up rewind time on a couple of plants at home. Bumping through a bunch of people, Katsuki leads them to the back of the shortest line, the one in the center booth, and takes a deep breath.

The kid looks up at him. She insisted on wearing at least some piece of shitty Deku's merchandise, and Katsuki convinced her, in the end, to go with the bunny ear hood that buttoned around her neck on top of a regular outfit instead of a straight-up Deku print shirt. It's not that he doesn't want her wearing Deku's merch, because he couldn't give two shits really, but rather it's that the only bits of official merch Deku has are from a special UA trainee preliminary collection, and boy are they *ugly*. The bunny ear hood meanwhile, is handmade and subtle. It helps that the weather is chilly enough that she won't get sweaty.

To make up for not getting to wear a shirt with Deku's dumb face screen printed on, she piled half her hero pins onto the strap of the bigger-on-the-inside pouch, the charmed one Koharu would bring everywhere. She looks like a walking pin shop there are so many. All sorts of heroes too, with the hand-drawn ones of the UA kids she liked from the last Sports Festival sprinkled here and there. It screams nerd.

And Katsuki had to blend in, so he's wearing a black All Might hoodie (one of the few items he used to own that he rebought) he had Eri litter with pins and a pair of black shorts. He has a cap to hide his hair as well. A little tinted hairspray, a little makeup, contacts, and a dark face mask complete the ensemble.

Getting ready for this little trip was surreal. Like preparing for an experience he always wanted to live as a kid, but never could. He felt like a fanboy putting on that hoodie; like he was four years old again and scored a shiny rare All Might card in the surprise packs sold at the arcade.

"—first years will be good?" he hears a man say to another behind him.

"I want to put in some offers for interns, last year there weren't any

good ones—" replies said companion. Their conversation quiets to nothing as they walk away, but it's enough a reminder to spike Katsuki's anxiety.

Half these fucks are heroes. They're here to scout. They're dangerous. They've got no idea who he and Eri are and it's going to stay that way. . He shakes his head as they come face to face with the gate of the UA barrier. The kid gasps beside him, eyes practically glittering in awe. Katsuki can't relate, the UA logo, decorated with this elaborate floral arrangement, makes him a little bit sick. But not today. Today, he's gonna ignore that little voice screaming 'never get your ass near that place again' every five seconds and he's gonna go in there and have fucking fun, whatever that means.

Because he ain't a weakling. So what if ninety-six percent of his most prominent UA-related memories suck ass and are regular features of his nightmares? So what if the visceral part of him wants to take UA and murder it using a blender, then launch the leftovers into Mars? The brat wants to go and he already went through the hassle of getting tickets. He hasn't forgotten how much watching the sports festival last year helped him come to terms with his feelings either. Maybe the same will happen again. Maybe he'll come out of this with better, sweeter UA memories, and it'll become the place that makes his kid happy instead of the place where he once crushed his own childish dreams like an empty can of coke.

"Brat," he says, smoothing a smudge of hair dye from her brow. "What are the rules?"

"One," she counts with her fingers, "don't talk to shitty extras. Two, stay away from anyone with a staff badge. Three, don't give anyone real personal details. Four, don't wander off. Five, use the passage or my bag to get home at the smallest sign of trouble."

"And if you run across a weirdo?"

"Run away. If I can't, *pew-pew* them with pepper spray then run away, if I can't do that, throw a sleep smoke bomb like *bam* then run away, if I can't do either, stab them with unicorn and run away, if even unicorn doesn't work, aim for the crotch then run away and find you or get home. "

"Perfect." He ruffles her hair and the shit-eating grin she totally copied from him stretches across her face. Though slowly, the line has been moving, and they're now second, behind someone dressed like

they live in the arctic who seems to be having some trouble with the screening procedure. Katsuki does not want that to be them, so he takes the tickets out of the plastic sleeve in his pocket and stares at them again, examining every crevice.

“Next,” says the clerk finally, and Katsuki’s heartbeat picks up. He hands over the tickets and waits, expecting something to go wrong, some dramatic accusation to be made.

Nope, the sleepy student manning the booth only asks for any sort of identification, runs their cards through a bunch of machines, has Katsuki slide down his mask to confirm that the face in front of her and the one in the passport are one and the same, and slides two Level One guest passes, attached to UA themed lanyards, across the hole in the booth’s glass.

“UA doesn’t take legal responsibility for lost items or injuries — help will be offered to you for both types of problems within campus, but you may not use it as grounds to sue. For more information on insurance, visit the official website,” the clerk drones on, worn out of giving everyone the same speech. “Your tickets are valid for day one, the festival ends at midnight. Enjoy your time!”

+ + +

They made it through. Things went so smoothly he could cry. It’s not a bad dream, here he is, at the start of the same winding path he walked every morning for three months under colossally different circumstances. UA’s cherry blossoms are late-blooming, so they’re still teeming with flowers even in late April. They’ve been used as a part of the décor, intermixed with faux flowers to enhance the atmosphere. Since the rest of the grounds are also quite green and forested, stands and tents and games have been set up right on the greenery, peeking above the trees. At the end of the winding path stands the central building, adorned with banners and streamers and flags. Aside from the visitors examining every piece of the campus curiously, Katsuki sees plenty of students in PE uniforms, most fresh faces Katsuki doesn’t recognize, rushing back and forth on the other end of the courtyard, yelling to each other and hauling supplies for last-minute endeavors. Katsuki loses himself in watching them, in watching how easy it is for them to live and put themselves out there and yell without risking their whole existence.

Eri yelling, “Suzu-chan!” snaps him out of it, and he allows himself to be dragged along until he comes face to face with Eri’s friend, Ibara

Suzuki, and an older man in a suit he assumes to be her father. Ibara can only be described as pink, pink hair, pink eyebrows, pink eyelashes, pink aura, pink undertones, and flushed cheeks. She's taller than usual compared to Eri, and she waves at Katsuki shyly. The first time they met (when he came to pick Eri up and Eri asked if they could *walk Suzu-chan home too pretty please*) kid didn't say one word to him, social norms be damned. Katsuki likes that. The less interacting with gremlin children the better.

"It's good to meet you, Hiryo-san," says her dad, stretching out a hand for Katsuki to shake. Roses are growing along his forearms and he looks nervous, funnily enough. "I'm Ibara Araki. My daughter has a lot of good things to say about your sister."

"Great." If he's expecting Katsuki to be the conversationalist he can forget it. The last thing he wants to do is be buddy-buddy with some random salaryman. He only agreed to this because it's a thing parents do, meeting up with other parents so their kids can have bonding time or whatever. Eri's childhood will be as normal as possible if he's got any say in it. So fuck it. Random salaryman hangout it is.

Salaryman dad laughs awkwardly. "I… um… I'm sorry to spring this on you, but I've received a sudden call from work, and it's urgent."

"But… papa…" Poor Suzu-chan looks at her dad like this is the worst thing that's ever happened to her. To Katsuki, it's at the same time an overreaction (because in the grand scheme of it it's nothing, it's a canceled outing, happens, that's life, bigger shit out there to be heartbroken over) and so intensely relatable he's feeling attacked (because how many times was he that kid whose activities were cut short in favor of getting trailed around fashion conferences like a dog on a leash, that kid who had to go everywhere alone because *we're busy, Katsuki* — in fact, this kid is reacting a lot better than kid Katsuki ever did. If it were him, something would at least be smoking by now).

"I'm truly sorry, sweetheart, but there's nothing I can do about it." He pats her head, but it does nothing to appease her. "I thought we could at least stay to greet Rin-chan and—"

"I'll watch her," Katsuki blurts out on pure dumb impulse.

"Oh no, Hiryo-san," His speech curls around the name in a way that lets Katsuki know his fake family has bargaining chip potential with this man. "I couldn't possibly—"

“Look,” he bites back the *suit man* at the tip of his tongue. If he’s taking this man’s child, making fun of him won’t do him any favors. “It’s up to you, and I don’t expect you to trust me, but she wants to stay, that’s obvious, and they’re good b— kids, they won’t make trouble.”

“Yeah!” Eri buts in, having picked up on what Katsuki’s trying to do. “We’ll be *super* good. Right, Suzu-chan?”

“R—right! Papa, please.”

He makes a good show of contemplating it, but the moment Katsuki laid eyes on him Katsuki knew his archetype, the ‘regretful’ parent who pretends to be sad about needing to spend time away from you but in reality couldn’t care less, because he’s got *adult* work to do, he’s got *ambition*, a *career*, he hasn’t got *time*, archetype. Like, who the fuck shows up to a festival in a suit unless they weren’t planning to bail from the start?

“Well alright…”

“Great. She’ll be home before sundown.” He’s loving this, he won’t lie. Annoying salaryman chaperone, get fucked. Seeing that the girls are already engrossed in conversation, Katsuki wastes no time in taking the bag of things from career man dad. “Bye.”

“W— h-have fun, honey!”

+ + +

It’s not so bad, tagging along after a pair of seven-year-olds and doing his very best to swerve and change walking direction whenever he catches the smallest glimpse of someone familiar.

“Wow, Eri-chan, you’re so good!” Suzuki claps as Eri pops her twelfth balloon in a row in the puffer fish-themed dart throwing game and the poor student running it flounders to procure a fourth Edgeshot plush that will match with the other three.

“Again!” Eri giggles, popping a thirteenth balloon. At home, she can throw knives dead center of a target ten meters away. This is child’s play.

She's won so much that a small crowd has gathered to watch, and the student pulls Katsuki to the side to ask frantic, "Man, she yours?"

"My sister, yeah."

"What do you feed her?!"

"Candy apples," says Eri, and the small audience cheers as the final balloon in the whole stand explodes into pieces.

+ + +

They want to go watch Deku. *He's holding a panel with All Might,* they say. *It's All Might!* They tell him, none the wiser that Katsuki's more than familiar with All Might, and has even been on the opposite end of an (admittedly weakened) Detroit Smash. It's a stupid idea he shouldn't agree to. It's the equivalent of him playing with a lighter while bleeding.

So he agrees because he fucking hates himself like that.

Think about it, his brain scrambles to rationalize, *if we get past the close encounters of the Deku kind now, I'll be more relaxed for the Sports Festival later*. It's bullshit and he knows it, but he'll hold on to anything that stops him from spiraling. The brats are hungry too, understandably, they've only had small snacks all day, but when they get to Deku's tent, there aren't enough seats left that they'll have time to get food and come back.

"We'll sit, and you get us food, Kacchan," says Eri. It's wouldn't be a bad idea, if they weren't seven and eight.

"We'll reserve you a seat, Hiryo-san," says Suzuki, because the little dipshits have the audacity to back each other up.

"It'll be fine. You'll be quick," Eri continues.

Deeming it the best plan possible, Katsuki sees them to their seats (as luck would have it, only the ones furthest from the podium and therefore least likely to be chosen for the Q&A are free) has a brief mental struggle over how responsible is to have them wait alone, and heads for the food stand he saw five minutes away before he can

regret it.

Inko eases her way through the crowd, clutching her purse tight as she's moved by the masses. There are several reasons she tends to prefer watching fairs from home, and the mess is one of them. But it's Izuku's third year, his last before her little boy becomes a full-fledged hero, and she'd chosen not to attend the Sports Festival for the first two — this is her final chance. Plus, this year is special, for example, Izuku will be holding a panel with All Might in, she checks her watch, eight minutes, she's so late. This campus is too large and confusing, she's spent her entire first half-hour here trying and failing to figure out her map.

"Hurry, hurry, hurry," she mumbles to herself, a nervous habit that Izuku's picked up and made even worse.

She's about to pick up something to eat at the row of food stands close to Izuku's tent, when she hears a voice that makes her freeze. A boy dressed in pin-adorned black clothing, hair covered, most of his face covered, is ordering from the stand next to the one she's second in line for, one selling stuffed buns made to look like various famous UA alumni.

"Two, no, three Best Jeanists… Endeavors are the spicy ones? Damn, I hate that guy… reasons… never mind. Three Endeavors as well… yeah… fuck no…"

She's either gone crazy, or that's Katsuki. As in the Katsuki who's been missing for upwards of two years, so missing that investigators decided he was better off being declared dead.

No. What are the chances of that? Running into him by pure coincidence? What would he be doing here? It makes her wince to think about, but when one pictures *missing*, they picture the opposite of well-dressed, healthy, and arguing over hero-themed meat buns. This isn't… she must be mistaken. Going off voice alone (the boy is too covered to discern anything else) — her brain could be playing tricks on her.

"Ma'am?"

She startles, refocusing on her own endeavor to buy food. In a flimsy plot to speak as little as possible, she points to the basket of Thirteen space suit-themed takoyaki instead of asking for it out loud. “One, please.” Because what if it is Katsuki, and he recognizes her voice too, and he runs away? (She doesn’t know what she’ll do if he doesn’t run away either but that’s beside the point.) The corners of her gaze stay trained on him even as he turns to leave.

Although she’s trying very hard to conclude that the whole experience was a trick of sound, she ends up following the dark hooded boy as if on autopilot and is conflicted to find that they both happened to have the same destination, Izuku’s tent. Covering her hair with her *Deku Go-Go* baseball cap, she pops her sunglasses over her nose and steps inside the tent.

It’s not on purpose, her ending up in the seat directly behind possibly-Katsuki — it’s the worst seat in the room and she’s the last one here, but since she’s here, she should… take advantage of the situation.

“Who wanted what?” asks possibly Katsuki, who sounds identical to what she imagines the voice of an older Katsuki would sound like. Her heart begins to speed up as she watches Katsuki interact with two elementary school-aged kids.

“I want spicy, Kacchan,” says the voice of a little girl. *Kacchan* bounces back and forth in her head crudely, the rest of her surroundings melting away. It *is* Katsuki. It has to be Katsuki. But why is he here? Why is he here with two little girls and why is he acting like their babysitter? *What is going on?*

“They’re hot,” he says. “You’ll get burnt, so wait for two damn seconds, brats.”

She should call the police. She should call Mitsuki. Like, look, here he is. I’ve found him. I found your long-lost son while buying takoyaki. Her hand rushes to the cellphone in her purse, but the tent’s lights pitch brighter, and a panel director is telling everyone to quiet down. To call or not to call. Her hands are shaking.

“Oh my god it’s starting,” says one of the little girls. Inko chances another glance and sees that she’s wearing a hood that looks so much like Izuku’s hero costume it can’t be by accident. She’s going to cry. Izuku used to have an All Might onesie with ears like that, now kids are wearing Izuku themed hoods. *He’s* the hero they’re looking up to — her little boy.

“Kacchan, do you think Deku-san will notice my hood?”

“I sure hope he doesn’t.” Katsuki sounds constipated. It’s taking all of Inko’s willpower to sit straight and turned away from him.

“That’s mean! He spent a long time making it, Suzu-chan. He tried to hide it from me but I saw him working on it—” *Katsuki* made merchandise? *That* Katsuki? The one who’d look at her son with disdain and laugh when he *breathed*? Is this a parallel universe?

“His official shit is fucking ugly! Crap… don’t tell your dad I swore, okay kid? Fluffing ugly, I said fluffing.”

Katsuki— Katsuki has the entire police force mobilized to search for him and here he is bargaining with little children over curse words?

“Shut up Kacchan, Deku-san is coming out.”

Inko takes a proper look at the podium where the panel is set up for the first time and sees three microphones lined up, one for All Might, one for the MC who’ll help the panel run smoothly, and one for Izuku. There’s a collective hush in the room as the curtains in the back part and Izuku comes out, his mentor right behind him.

“T—Thanks for coming everyone!” he says, eyes scanning the packed tent (it’s not a small space, larger than some of the biggest courtrooms Inko’s been in) and that’s all it takes for Inko to start tearing up, her nonsensical discovery pushed aside for a moment of pride.

“So cool!” the girls whisper to one another, and Inko is swung straight back to the situation at hand. “He’s going to be number one in like… two years.”

“He’ll climb up the hero billboard like, *fwoom* and *kapow*.”

Inko takes off her sunglasses, recognizing that they attract more attention than they distract while they’re indoors. The panel starts but she’s unfocused because every time she manages to trick herself into ignoring the problem sitting in front of her and concentrating on her son and how proud she is, Katsuki will make an off-hand comment and her brain will begin screaming *he is right there!*

After something like five minutes, she’s had enough. Taking a deep fortifying breath, she taps Katsuki’s shoulder.

“D—” It dies in his throat, extinguished, reduced to a breathless half

croak. His mask is pulled down because he's been eating one of those buns she heard him buying, and the face, for all its wrongness, is unmistakably Katsuki's. Inko watched him grow up for long enough to know. His eyes are as different as they are familiar, an odd shade of yellow, surrounded by ray-like scars, glasses to top the ensemble off. Recognition sparks in them like a storm, followed by a messy something — fear or anger or panic or guilt she can't interpret — all in the two seconds they maintain direct eye contact. Then his gaze begins to shift, unstable, as he tries and fails to direct his attention anywhere but her. "I'm— you're—"

Although she makes sure to keep her voice low when she says, "Katsuki-kun." he flinches hard and their chairs are close enough that she can hear the beginnings of staccato in his breathing.

"People ask me about my hero name often," says Izuku, voice extra loud because the speakers are placed at their backs, a mere three steps away. "Don't worry, it's not an offensive question or anything. Yes, it's a childhood nickname." Katsuki flinches again and grips the edges of his seat like he's trying to stop himself from hyperventilating. That's not good.

He's only as old as Izuku, Inko reminds herself. She sure doesn't consider Izuku an adult yet, whether he'll have the right to vote in a few months or not, and she realizes that unless she wants this delicate situation to fall apart, *she's* going to need to be the adult and take control.

"Outside," she mouths.

He shakes his head in small bursts. "Can't." His eyes keep shifting to random patches of air around her as if he can see something she can't. Is it the girls he's babysitting he's worried about?

"There's security. They'll keep an eye on the girls," Inko whispers. "You need air."

"I—"

"Is it true that *Bakugou* was the one who gave it to you?" throws out someone from the other side of the tent. The mood instantly drops by several degrees and the subject in question, who no one knows is here with them, looks two seconds shy of a breakdown.

"I'm stepping out for a sec," he tells the two girls.

“Eh? Why? This is the best part.”

“Are you alright, Hiryo-san?”

“…I need the bathroom.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Don’t go anywhere.”

“Course not, Deku-san’s not done for another half hour.”

“Okay. Yeah. Okay. I’m going then.”

They use the mess of people who’ve squeezed themselves into the tent last minute by opting to stand in the empty space to make their exit seem unremarkable, and Katsuki follows her without making a single sound to the space between this tent and the next, the only nearby place that has no other people around.

“Katsuki-kun—”

“Stop. Don’t talk.” He crouches down, lifts his glasses, and kneads his eyes, counting under his breath. Despite being much taller than her, he looks small, and there’s this feeling about him Inko can only describe as translucency, a sense that if she looks away, he’ll melt into the air and disappear.

“I’m not going to hurt you.”

“You can’t.” He swallows. “You can’t tell anyone.”

Mitsuki should be here, Inko thinks. Not her. She doesn’t know what to say. She doesn’t know where to start. “But you’re not alright, Katsuki—”

“Stop saying my name.” Frustration oozes out of his tone. “I’m fine. I was fine. I *was*.”

“Where have you been, all this time?” she tries to ask gently. “Everyone has been worried sick. Your parents—”

“Don’t you hate me?” Her stomach drops like she’s swallowed stones.

“What?”

“You should hate me.”

“Why would I—”

“Don’t play dumb. You know how I treated Izuku. I bet he tried to hide it when we got older but when we were small you were *there*.” Her heart twists because Katsuki’s not unwarranted in assuming these would be her feelings, considering that not too long ago she *had* resented him a little — before everything happened. She doesn’t say anything, and neither does he, for an uncomfortable amount of time. “…I owe you a fucking apology.”

“Not me”

“Yeah, you. It hurt you too. Your kid having a rough time because of assholes like me damn straight hurt, plus, I made things awkward between you and— and the hag.”

If she’s honest, that’s only part of the truth. Inko met Masaru and Mitsuki a few years before the boys were born when she was the stenographer for a minor lawsuit where some fashion retailer had breached contract and stolen the Bakugous’ designs without compensation. They were nice enough, lived close to Inko’s apartment, and new friends had been welcome for someone in post-university limbo like her. She and Mitsuki ended up having kids at around the same time by pure chance, and since everything about the boys matched, from ages to nearby playgrounds to interests, Inko was quite happy to see them become childhood playmates. However, their personalities had some core differences, and as Katsuki got older, he grew more and more… difficult, aggressive, domineering. As a child, Izuku had never been the type most would single out as the best in a group — he was gentle, strong-willed, quiet with strangers, and a little awkward and clumsy, which coupled with his lack of quirk, made him a prime target for playground teasing. Katsuki meanwhile, loved to assert his superiority, especially toward people like Izuku, who was so nice in comparison he made Katsuki look like well, a little demon.

Things only got *bad* bad as they progressed further into primary school though, and that’s where Mitsuki and Masaru’s complicated influence comes into play. Because Inko’s not blind. Yeah, she cries a lot, but her eyes still function. And she could see how Mitsuki and Masaru would be exhausted by juggling work and Katsuki, how their business was picking up and that meant even less time to rest, how they slowly began to detach themselves from their son and by extension her, and the rest of his friend’s parents. By removing Katsuki from the equation as much as possible — signing him off to extended family and summer camps and daycares — they must have figured

they'd have more time to dedicate to both work and rest, something they *desperately* needed. Problem was, ignoring Katsuki didn't mean he'd disappear, it meant he was left to his own devices for longer, and… he got worse.

Inko herself had offered to take care of Katsuki a couple of times when he and Izuku were still on speaking terms. (As she's come to understand, they full-on ignored each other for a couple of years) and as guilty as she is to admit something like this about a six-year-old, Katsuki had indeed been *exhausting*. She didn't know what to say to him, how to deal with his moods, how to calm him down. And now that she looks back on it, Katsuki might have been extra difficult because he *knew* being with her and Izuku meant his own parents didn't want him, or because behaving was one of the few things Izuku was definitively better at than him back then.

Her talks with Mitsuki have made her contemplate things a lot — if there was more she could have done, signs she could have recognized, actions she could have taken that would have saved both Katsuki and Izuku a lot of pain growing up.

"I was a little turd whenever I came over too. I regret all of it."

"Izuku's the one you should save this for."

"I already told him," Katsuki says, turning to look at her properly. "First thing I did after I got out of that basement—" She winces. "—and got my shit together. He's too soft. Forgave me too easy." As surprised as she is that the two met up before and Izuku didn't tell the police (??) that reaction does sound like her boy. People might see it as a weakness, but she's come to accept his generous soul is one of Izuku's greatest strengths.

"Then I'll stand by his decision."

"Soft," Katsuki mumbles, digging his fingers into his forearms hard and standing up. "Don't tell anyone. Forget you saw me."

"You need to explain what's going on." Because there's so much to ask. What's he doing here? Where has he been staying? Who are those girls they left inside and why does one call him Hiryo? How are they here? Why won't he come back if he's got seeming free range to do as he pleases.?

"A lot, a lot's going on."

“Try to summarize it for me.”

“…You’re for real?”

“Yes?” she tries to keep her expressions neutral and voice pleasant, so as not to scare him.

“Well, fuck, you know how I got kidnapped?” She nods. “Yeah, did you think I died? They said I died in the news, but that was a lie. Because I didn’t. I did some other stuff. Got better. Came to UA to apologize to Deku, then did some *more* stuff until I got kidnapped the second time, and I broke out again, took a kid with me, the one who calls me Kacchan. Then some other shit happened and now I’m here.”

There are… a *lot* of holes in that story.

“You need to elaborate on… Katsuki-kun, I don’t know what you’ve been doing with your life for the past two years, and as far as I know, you’re eighteen now.” His birthday was last week, Mitsuki was extra down on that day. “… so you have a legal right to make your own decisions… but I think your parents deserve to know about them, and about what happened to you.” Then, he can cut off contact if that’s what he wants. It’s fair, isn’t it? It sounds fair to her. It would make everyone happy.

“No,” he insists. “You don’t get it. I *can’t*. They don’t want to see me __”

She knows for a fact that’s not true.

“And I can’t just, show up. They wouldn’t let me leave. I’m not doing *that* again.” He’s not making much sense. “*Please*, keep it to yourself. I’ll fucking beg if you want me to.”

Inko has to stop herself from gaping. What is this boy so terrified of?

“There’s a lot going on that would take too long to explain, but… if you tell, it’ll ruin my life.”

She sucks in a breath. “You’re scaring me.” Does he think Mitsuki and Masaru hate him?

“I’m serious.” The next ten seconds pass with Katsuki trying to convince her of said seriousness through an unflinching stare. Those yellow eyes are *wrong*.

“Okay. Alright.” The words seem to thicken her tongue. “I won’t tell.”

They go back inside and pretend nothing happened.

+ + +

He’s fucked he’s fucked he’s fucked he’s fucked he’s fucked says the broken tape of his brain. King of bad luck… he’s the fucking *emperor*.

“Hurry up,” Eri says, oblivious to Katsuki’s precociously balanced sanity. Since finishing up at Deku’s tent (“But why can’t we ask questions Kacchan?” “Because of the *thing*, the *issue*.” “Ohh.”) they’ve whirred through five separate stands, had their hero fortunes read (“It’s amazing.” “What is?” “You have the worst fortune I’ve ever drawn, like, by far… are you sure you’re like… okay?”) and their caricatures painted (The artist emphasized Katsuki’s eye ray scars, making it look like his face was on the brink of exploding) and their grip strength tested, plus, being in the audience for two puppet shows and a short stage play. Katsuki’s tired, and he hasn’t even been able to pretend he’s enjoying the day, because he feels like he’s being watched, everywhere and all the time.

“Can we… can we get one of those?” Eri asks, pointing to a stand selling ‘exclusive class 3-A plushies’. Katsuki’s ready to buy the whole stand for her, elated that she’s gained enough confidence to regularly express herself and ask for shit, but then he sees that alongside the unfamiliar face, raccoon eyes and motherfucking Todoroki are also running the stand, and the last thing he needs is another close encounter, much less one with a twice damned Todoroki.

“We’ll come back later,” he tells her.

“But…”

“The line is long and we’ll be late for the tournament.”

“We’ll be stuck with bad seats again,” argues Suzuki. Good fucking kid.

“Okay,” Eri relents.

By the time they’ve made it through the security checks to enter the stadium and settled down in their seats (the back of the second-highest stand, where the view is good and Katsuki knows no familiar faces can sneak up on him from behind) Katsuki feels like he’s descended into a state of manic paranoia. Everyone he looks at will be cause for suspicion, every step he takes he’ll begin to question. Why does he keep seeing a bunch of bitches without uniforms moving boxes around the cracks between stands? *Clean up and restock.* Why do people keep bumping into him? *It’s a goddamn fair, everyone bumps into everyone.* Why does he submit do dumb ideas? *Because you're fucking stupid, and you love to tiptoe the edges of the ravine.*

What was the likelihood of him and Deku’s fucking mom bumping into each other like that? One in a thousand, ten thousand, a million? It must have been his voice that gave him away — his fault for slipping up and being too tired of smoothing it out by force. She was a little chubbier than Katsuki remembered (it *has* been upwards of a decade since they paid each other any real attention) but her face still had that same quality about it, that expression that makes you feel like you should bow down and apologize both when you haven’t done a thing and *especially* when you have.

The worst part is, her promise of silence and the fact that it’s been hours and no one has yet jumped out of the bushes to announce “Bakugou Katsuki, you’re busted!” is giving Katsuki a false sense of security, and his mood keeps flip-flopping between *we need to get out of here now* and *yeahh look how well I handled that we can afford to stay a little longer.*

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!” The entire fucking stadium jerks as the booming voice startles them. Cuckatoo-sensei and his goddamn elephant-sized windpipes. “WELCOME TO THE SHOWDOWN OF THE DECADE. THIS YEAR’S SENIORS ARE THE HIGHEST RATED IN THIS INSTITUTION'S THREE-QUARTER-CENTURY HISTORY, AND YOU BETTER KEEP THOSE TVS ON, BECAUSE UA’S GOING TO NEED TO PAY FOR ALL THE STRUCTURAL DAMAGE SOMEHOW!”

He tries to swallow his problems with popcorn.

+ + +

The tournament is fine. It's decent. It's a thing that happenens that he's come to understand he cares very little for watching. Katsuki likes fights when he's in them, even then under very strict circumstances. It doesn't help that the stadium is pretty much a concentrated mosh pit of auras, and Refrigerator-sensei overhauling the playing field after every round (Present Mic wasn't kidding about the structural damage — his ex-classmates fight like it's life or death, Plus Ultra or whatever bullshit.) means his yucky grey gloop, in particular, is everywhere. It is some amount of fascinating though, seeing the auras of people he used to know and noting how much they match their quirks and personalities. Deku's is kind of hard to look at, because even from afar it's huge and colorful and All for One-ish, and Katsuki swears he sees human-like shapes flying out of it on occasion.

The two hero fangirls he's come here with make sure to fill in every gap of knowledge he might possibly have, and he comes to learn that Deku has five quirks now, even more than last year? The similarities to All for One aren't exclusive to the aura's look it seems.

It's fine. It's whatever. Playing fields explode, bones are broken, Cuckatoo-sensei screams, Aizawa offers his standard dry commentary that does not make Katsuki flinch whenever he hears it, what an outrageous assumption and the sun swoops across the sky. Deku wins, surprise surprise, the guy is All Might with a million extra quirks tacked on top of the super-strength. Medals are awarded, no one is tied to the podium, even when Round Face refuses her medal because Glasses, who she was supposed to fight for third place, was disqualified due to breaking his wrist bad enough that a Recovery Hag smooch wouldn't be able to heal it. One of these days he's gonna have to accept that the muzzle and chains contraption was thought up for him in particular, that there had never been a precedent and there wouldn't be a repeat, because look where it got UA the first time. Katsuki was special like that. He hates it.

"Let's go home," he tells the girls, because he's very much had it with this festival, he's exposure therapized away all his UA related problems that's a lie but whatever, and even though he's pretty sure that if Deku's mom did say something the cops would have cornered him by now, he doesn't want to push their luck by staying further.

"What about the Deku-san plush?" asks Eri meekly. Because the fights dragged on and on, the tournament ended way later than they'd anticipated, and the sun is already on the verge of disappearing behind Musutafu's skyline. Katsuki promised suit man his kid would be home before that, and he's not about to break his promises. Neither

of them.

“We’ll take Suzuki home, and we’ll come back for the plush.” The line for the stand was so long that there’s no way they’d be able to get her home in time if they also bought the plush.

“But… her house is so far.”

“Me and papa were on the train for a whole hour in the morning…”

It’s only a ten-minute walk from Minami Early though, and they can fucking teleport. Ibara won’t be able to see the shop because they’ll only pass through the actual house part of the house, if she says anything (which Katsuki doubts) both Koharu’s space quirk and her connection to the Hiryos is already public information, someday, if her and Eri stay friends, she’ll want to come over anyway… it’s the fastest way to get her home.

“We’re gonna take the special path,” he tells them, and they locate a free bathroom stall to set the portal up in (UA has gender-neutral bathrooms alongside designated male and female).

“Woah.” Suzuki’s eyes go wide as the hallway of their house unfolds beyond what was, until two seconds ago, a plain tiled wall. “Woah.”

“It’s a super-secret *magic* path,” Katsuki whispers as they step over into the hall. “So don’t f—floofing tell anyone.”

“Eri-chan, this is amazing!”

Katsuki can tell the kid wants them to adopt her now, but he doesn’t have the time for it — leaving an open portal at UA is making him nervous — so he rushes to get them out the Minami Early portal, keeping up the charade of magic doors the whole time.

By six pm the sun has ebbed away and Katsuki and Eri are back through the UA portal, having seen Suzuki all the way home (her mom — fresh off work, a real shocker, she’s a salary woman — was there to greet them.) He’d have bartered to just stay home, but they *did* need to pick the portal back up and leave the regular way, so he had no choice.

“Piggyback?” Eri asks, as they walk the now sparse inner passageways of the stadium.

“Why the fuck not.” He does this a lot with Satsu, who’s kind of Eri’s

size anyway (shitty furball gets bigger and bigger every month) because their dumb cat is spoiled and still thinks he's as small as a kitten.

"I'm having so much fun Kacchan."

If his hair weren't already white it would have become so today, but if Eri thinks so, sure, it's fun.

"Thank you so much for bringing me."

"It's no big deal," he says, all faux nonchalant, and finds that he's started to properly relax, satisfied in knowing that they've got one last thing to do and he won't see UA again for a long while.

Relaxing is a mistake. Don't do it.

He's thinking about how much of a miracle it is that they haven't run into anyone even after three minutes of speed walking when he turns a corner and crashes into the worst-case scenario. The get run over by a cement truck scenario. The caught on the fiftieth floor of a skyscraper with crap construction in a 9.0 magnitude earthquake scenario. The stuck forever in a mutilated dead body because your soul refuses to leave scenario.

It's Aizawa. And Cockatoo. And Midnight.

Both sides halt. Katsuki knows he should be running but his feet are stuck, his eyes blown so wide open he can feel the breeze drying them out, his heart sprinting a fucking hundred-meter dash inside his rib cage. Their auras stick out like sore thumbs in the washed-out hall, Aizawa's an unassuming film of red, Mic's a cloud of what can only be described as *loud*, reminiscent of the angry scribbles you make over a drawing that sucks, Midnight's an airy pink powder that reminds Katsuki with a swoop of his stomach of flower head.

"Are you lost?" sensei asks, all gruff, sizing him up, and Katsuki pushes down the intense urge to roll over and die. "The tournament ended a while ago." They don't recognize him? Can he salvage this? Can he lie through his teeth and have this be another close encounter in the sea of close encounters?

His smart little heathen of a kid seems to understand this situation is life or death (Katsuki advised her that Eraserhead, in particular, is the hugest no no) and she pushes down his inside-out cap so his hair has no hope of peeking through from where she's hanging on his

shoulders.

“Yeah, we’re, uh, looking for the exit,” Katsuki says in keigo, pitching his voice high enough that it sounds embarrassing.

“This isn’t a passage meant for spectators, listeners. But since you’re already here, keep walking until you see a yellow double door.”

“Thank you,” Katsuki says, a bit too rushed, and shuffles past them before he can see their reactions.

Heart racing with the beginnings of relief, he’s only walked three steps before a familiar and overwhelming sweet scent hits his nose and he feels himself droop into unsolicited sleep.

Chapter End Notes

1) i have never felt so conflicted about a chapter
2) many parts of this were written months ago, and i ended up making a ton of last minute changes as well. i actually have a second finished draft of the chapter that i didn't like. it's 11k words and i thought worth posting though, so I'll be posting it separately as a side story kinda
3) I've been meaning to have inko and katsuki interact for a really long time. she's kind of your general public when it comes to katsuki, just knows what's on the news and that's about it. mitsuki doesn't tell her details because they're supposed to be top secret, and she doesn't know about all the things katsuki's involved in or his powers. it works in katsuki's favor because she'd be much more inclined to call the police if she knew more
4) if you're thinking it's bullshit and over convenient that Inko doesn't tell anyone about meeting Katsuki... all imma say is hold on.
5) how was that scene, by the way? I have a tendency to dull emotional scenes with humor, or be worried that they'll come off as cringy if i don't, and the original was a lot more humorous and out there. lmk what you think
6) a lot of this is slice of life
7) can't remember if I've talked about this before but i actually contracted covid for the first time about a week and a half ago, and I've been quarantined since so I've had a lot of time to consume media and well, write. luckily my symptoms were very mild, but i live with other people who I don't want to risk infecting and I keep testing positive even though i don't have symptoms anymore, so I'm not sure how long my quarantine is

gonna last TT
8) my brain is fried
9) thank you sm everyone for reading. i can't believe we've crossed 100k hits.
10) dances

Chapter 33: The one you've all been waiting for ("I pay ALL my taxes!")

Chapter Summary

shit goes down

Chapter Notes

hugest apology in existence. i'll be very frank with you guys, because you've supported me so much, but I've sort of started to hate a lot of parts of this fic TT. not in an extreme way, more like in an it frustrates me because it's kind of crap in a lot of places way. i don't really like my writing, or how I've handled the character development, or how I've structured the plot. that said, it's probably the hugest project I've ever done, and i still have passion for it buried beneath all that self-critique, so I'll try my best to finish it even though I'm acutely aware of all its flaws.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You can’t tell.”

Perhaps foolishly, or naively, Inko lets him leave. She allows Bakugou Katsuki to slip from her fingers knowing full well she’ll regret it, knowing full well she’s not the one who deserves to have encountered him. She watches him leave with her heart in her throat, and it’s the guiltiest she’s felt in a long while. The crowd quickly swallows him up, leaving her to do nothing but blow her nose on a handkerchief.

What is she supposed to do?

If you tell, you’ll ruin my life.

She doesn’t understand.

“Mom,” she turns to look at Izuku, all dolled up and looking dapper in his blue shirt. The sight of him so grown up makes her forget her stress for a moment. Standing up, she captures him in a hug. “You came,” Izuku whispers.

“Surprise,” she stands back to smooth down his collar. “You were amazing!”

“You think so?” he says, looking away. The tent has emptied of the

rest of the audience, so it feels too big for just two people. Or, three, if you count All Might. “Is that why you’re crying?.”

“No… ah… I got emotional is all.” She smooths out his brow as he starts to pull away. “My little boy will be a full-fledged hero in less than a year. It feels like yesterday that you were using my blue maxi dresses as All Might capes—”

“Mom!”

“Do not be embarrassed, Young Midoriya,” pipes up All Might, that fatherly tone in his voice. “Your mother is right. You’ve come a long way, and you’ve made us both very proud.” Inko knows, about the One for All thing. Izuku getting one quirk abnormally late was one thing, but five of them? It was too much to buy, and one night late last year, both he and All Might visited her at home to lay down the fact. She wasn’t (and still kind of isn’t) the happiest about some of the story’s details, like the fact that Izuku hid a year’s worth of training outings with essentially a stranger from her, and lied to her about how his quirk came about, and never had the chance to discuss the pros and cons with anyone before inheriting a power that came with the weight of the world attached, but she also knows that her son is getting to fulfill his ambitions (an often underrated part of him) in a way greater than his greatest dreams, and he’s made his choices (as dangerous as they might be) and she won’t be getting in the way of them (as much as it stresses her out).

One of the hardest things to come to terms with as a parent is that you can’t keep your kids safe under your wings forever, especially those like Izuku, who are made to smash molds and cages into pieces.

She thinks of Katsuki again and considers *his* right to make *his* own decisions.

“Izuku…”

“Yeah?”

“I’m… you’re competing in the sports festival right?”

“Yeah. I wonder what kind of games they’ve set up this year—” Her son fast falls into muttering, and reluctantly, she decides to keep the secret a little longer.

Inko is very bad at this. It’s been a few hours since she and Katsuki

split up, and she's been mindlessly trotting about the festival grounds, opening and closing the contact app on her phone, hovering over Mitsuki's number for a couple of seconds only to have *they don't want to see me* ring in her head and make her scroll away again.

Twice now she's run into teachers and found herself aching to tell but unable to. One thing about her is that she'll keep promises to a stubborn degree. She should've never sworn to keep the secret. Maybe then her tongue wouldn't thicken up every time she tried to get the words out.

It's close to twilight and the Sports Festival is almost over (Her Izuku won, and he's going to get his medal right now!) when she can't take it anymore and succumbs to temptation. Once the phone has rung three times she knows it's too late to back out, and soon the line connects.

"What's wrong?" Mitsuki asks, and it takes all of Inko's mental strength not to tear up right then and there.

"Where are you, right now?"

"We're in Fuji. Had a few days off work and we wanted to… you know… after… we always wanted to bring Katsuki here and it was his…yeah… why do you ask?"

She gulps. "Because, I, uh, I saw Katsuki."

The *what* from the other end of the line is so loud Inko has to take away her phone a little.

"He was fine, Mitsuki. He was all disguised and he's adopted a little girl? He was a little thinner and older but he was fine—"

"You better not be fucking with me—"

"No, no, I swear. I talked to him, and I know it was him. Mitsuki… he begged me not to tell. He said it would ruin his life. I'm… I'm so sorry but I saw him hours ago, and you're the first one I'm telling because I felt so guilty. He *begged* me—"

Silence. A wet inhale. "We'll be there as soon as we can. There's still a chance he might not have left. Tell some teacher fuck, Inko, *please*, let them know what he looked like so they can search for him. Please."

"I will. I will right now. I'm so sorry, Mitsuki."

With the medal ceremony over and the crowds dispersing from the stadium, she rushes down, waits for Izuku to finish his checkup, and tells him everything.

If you were to ask Shouta why they decided to use Midnight's gas in that hallway, he wouldn't be able to give you a short answer, because, in truth, there isn't a succinct reason. Or rather, instead of one giant, glaring reason, it's a built up amalgamation of tiny ones.

Red flag number one, two people who are seemingly guests are in the staff and student only passages. This is odd because hero fans can get a little overzealous, so secret, more private halls are pretty much a requirement for running this tournament smoothly. No one wants to walk into too curious hero nerds or trashy journalists or villains in disguise looking for revenge when they've been destroyed in a "plus ultra" sparing session and need the nurse asap. The tunnels are deliberately made to be discreet. If you aren't already familiar with UA as an inisder, or have been explicitly looking for them for a good hour, there's no way you'd stumble upon them.

But hey, let's say the two are actual guests who have ties with a student and got tipped off to the existence of the passages, or they got one in a million lucky and found them on their own. Since the passages aren't marked, if you did stumble upon them, you'd have no idea you weren't meant to be there. Honest mistake. Shouta can buy that.

He's fully prepared to buy that in fact, until the two strangers in question start acting… weird. For one, the taller of the two, this lanky guy covered in black from head to toe, freezes in place as if he's been caught doing something extremely illegal, even though he was barely suspect in the first place. Shouta's eyes narrow and his decades of backlogged training kick in, urging him to study every part of the two strangers. Blame Nezu and his incessant insistence that the League will be attacking soon for his paranoia. It's comical the way the boy's yellow eyes blow wide, the way it takes him far too long to register Shouta's question and offer up a shoddy response. He speaks with strained and stiff politeness (as if he's making an active effort to alter his voice) and can't be much older than Shouta's own kids— uh, class. The little girl perched on the boy's shoulders, red-eyed and wearing a green hood, is looking at them with poorly disguised distrust while the boy's eyes rake in their everything as if he's stumbled on a distant dream of long lost pasts. Shouta doesn't miss the way the girl pushes the boy's cap down as if to obscure him further. It's fucking weird,

and what's weirder is that his skin itches the more he looks at the boy in a way that makes him want to tie him up with the capture weapon sitting pretty on his neck and demand answers for why his very appearance makes Shouta so damn uncomfortable.

How the guests rush to get out of their toes is suspicious too, and when their backs are turned, Shouta shares a glance with his longtime friends and coworkers, and that one glance is all he needs to confirm that he's not the only one with suspicions. They've been working together for years, so they know how to signal each other and communicate without making noise. Use a weak plume of Midnight's gas to make the boy a little drowsy, have a little talk, clear up what is hopefully a misunderstanding, and everyone can be on their merry ways, that's the plan they concoct in something like ten seconds.

The guy collapsing like a ragdoll after the first whiff of gas is not part of the plan, and evidently, the girl isn't expecting it either, because she lets out a yelp as she falls into a heap right with him. Shouta covers his mouth with a cupped hand without much care and rushes over, swatting gas away with his free arm.

"Didn't you make it weak?!" Mic asks, voice about twenty decibels higher than should be legal in conversations.

"I did!" And it's obvious she's not lying, because Shouta has inhaled some of it himself, and it feels no different than the extra weight on his bones when he's gone three days too long without sleep. Mystery boy either has a freakish attraction to Midnight, or there's something seriously wrong here.

He's leaning down to assess the damage when something hits his face and *burns.*

"Did that kid just *pepper spray* Shouta?!"

Shouta wouldn't know, because he's too busy trying to stop himself from clawing his own face off.

"Don't touch him!" slurs the girl, deeply drowsy. "*Go away go away go away*—"

"We're not going to hurt him, sweetie," he hears Nemuri say, "we didn't mean for him to fall like that. I only wanted to make him a little sleepy so we'd get a better chance to talk. Please, put away the pepper spray so I can check his vitals. It might be possible that he had a bad reaction to my gas."

“No.”

Shouta’s vision has cleared enough that he can see the thin white cast that’s begun to build around the girl. Her quirk? He cancels it immediately, not willing to risk it going haywire.

“Look, kid—”

“I don’t trust you. Go away,” she insists. That bottle of pepper spray seems endless, and her unknown quirk makes her too volatile a subject to storm.

“What were you doing in the staff-only passages?” Hizashi tries gently. “You know visitors aren’t allowed through here? Or… have you come to do something else?”

“I wanted to see the festival!” says the girl, slurring even more than before. “Stupid stupid *stupid*—”

So maybe they are plain old visitors who found the staff routes by a stroke of luck? Is this indeed one giant misunderstanding? Shouta prays it is because he’d rather deal with a sleepy disgruntled visitor than a villain attack waiting to happen. He straightens up and uses his scarf to nick the bottle of spray right from the girl’s loose grip. She flounders, on the verge of tears, making him doubt his assessment of innocent misunderstanding.

“I think this is our bad, kid,” Shouta says. “We thought you two were intruders. Let us check on him and you can both be on your way.”

But the kid isn’t listening to what he’s saying at all, her eyes keep darting from place to place like she’s looking for an escape route, and she keeps yawning, and her hands keep straying from the boy’s hoodie to this pin adorned pouch she’s wearing. Then, she pulls out a ginormous rainbow knife that ends up clattering uselessly to the floor as she succumbs to sleep before she can fling it at Shouta.

“What the fuck?” mutters Mic. Looking at it closer, that knife is definitely real and definitely sharp. Shouta shivers, uncomfortable all over again. Why was a kid prepared to stab them and how did a knife that fucking huge make it through security? An intense sense of dread crawls over Shouta’s skin as Nemuri helps him lay the two figures down and check for any obvious injuries. The girl’s hair dye comes off on his fingers. Her roots are white, and a horn is protruding from her forehead.

A certain little girl matching this description he failed to rescue in one of the missions that most often features in his nightmares comes to mind without permission, and he suppresses the thought with immediate quickness. There's no way.

"His heart rate's way too low," says Nemuri, who's been checking the boy in the meantime. Shouta scoots over to get a closer look and notes his hair is dyed too the same ashy blonde. There are strange scars around his eyes and taking off his mask reveals a sallow, angular, and far too familiar face. It's… no… *there's no way*. Hands shaking, he's relieved to find small gasping breaths still coming out of the boy.

"Doesn't he look like…" the thought trails off, sticky in Shouta's throat. Hiryo Shin says his guest pass, featuring a picture familiar yet not that makes Shouta's heartbeat spike. He can hear the blood rushing in his ears as he reads more of the pass. *Quirk: Electrical Interference* it says.

"Like…?"

"Bakugou," he breathes, and all of a sudden it clicks. His hunch about the girl must be right too, she looks like Eri for a reason, and it was Bakugou who took Eri back then. "Fuck."

"Bakugou as in— what do you mean Bakugou? Bakugou's—"

"*Here*. The hair is dyed, the eye color could be contacts, he's lost weight, I mean… look at him!"

"Shouta you're—"

"Right. It would explain why he froze like that, why he knows the passage, why he's got the girl we failed to rescue from the Hassaikai back then—"

"That's her?!"

"—And why he collapsed like this," cuts in Nemuri, a new urgency in her voice as she rushes to pry Bakugou out of Shouta's shaking hands and prop him up. "I remember, I always had to use weaker gas on him, because he's got Nitrogliceryin in his body, his heart rate's already too low—"

Shouta can't believe it. His eyes keep bouncing back and forth from Eri to Bakugou as he fails to process this coincidence and fazes in and out of the conversation. The kid is *alive*. He's alive and well enough to

attend festivals for fun. He didn't die in a ditch. He didn't get sold into human trafficking or become villain food or whatever increasingly disturbing scenario Shouta's head has conjured up in his darkest hours. He's *here*.

"We better get him to Chiyo," Mic says.

When Katsuki wakes up, it feels similar to regaining consciousness after death. Everything is cranked up by five levels. Brights are brighter, darks are darker, sensations inflamed, feelings too tangible. The sticky pads of wires on him make his spine ache to curl, and the beeping of the heart rate machine rings like an unwelcome alarm bell.

He's in UA's infirmary. Or one of them, at least. It's easy enough to recognize, as Recovery Hag always decorates them the same, and he remembers the makeshift tent one from the final exams far more than he'd like to admit. He's wearing a hospital smock. Eri's gone, his clothes and supplies are gone, his knives are gone — he's in UA's fucking infirmary and it was fucking Aizawa who found him. The heart rate monitor and ECG wires are flung off before the machine can pick up his panic and start freaking out with him, he sits up and tries to breathe. What now? What fucking now? Did Deku's mom snitch or did those shitnerd teachers recognize him? He needs to get out of here. He needs to get home and disappear and sleep for a thousand years. How? He can't… Who knows where they took the kid.

Scrambling off the bed, he scans the room frantically for some sort of tool or weapon.

Calm down, he tells himself. You'll get out of here. They won't turn you into the commission right away. You can bargain. You can talk your way out of it. Get Eri back and you're set. Calm down.

A ruler, a tabletop lamp stand and a curtain, and a couple of solid glass-covered picture frames are what he comes up with. The room has been all but stripped clean, likely because the fuckers saw how many knives he had on him and didn't want to risk him getting creative with the room's contents. With his glasses nowhere in sight, he can't make out far away things all that well, and the panic is not helping. The window becomes the most obvious route of escape when he finds the door locked. Yeah, the window is also locked, but glass is breakable, and a little bit of heavy bashing with the pointy tip of a solid metal lamp stand is all it takes to crack it open. Outside, the

night's air is cold, the dark sky illuminated by the festival's blurry and faraway multicolored lights. Sticking his head outside proves his initial assumption that he's in a private room of the stadium's infirmary because the glass-lined exterior of the arena stretches in every direction. He'd wager they're on the third floor, and the drop is something like seven meters. Risky to jump. Apart from a single one directly beneath him, no other windows are open. It's silent, or at least his damaged hearing can't pick anything substantial up. Turning back to his bed, he takes the sheets and uses a sharp shard from the window to rip them into strips. UA's got quality bedding, he'll give them that, and it comes in handy when you're looking to make yourself a sturdy escape rope.

The bed is on wheels, so he ties the rope firmly on the headboard, places a good length of the rope under the mattress, and hangs the excess from the window after rolling the bed so its foot is directly in front of the smashed pane. This way, the rope will hold until he makes it all the way down. Then it's a matter of grabbing Eri, making a run for it, and possibly fleeing the country altogether. No one from the public cares about him within japan anymore, never mind outside of it.

He's descended a couple of feet when he hears distinctly loud voices from his "room" and the spike of anxiety makes his already sweat-slick grip slip from the sheet. The world pauses, and he's convinced this is it for him. He'll fall splat on the floor and crack himself open so badly there'll be no going back, no resuscitation, only forever imprisoned by his stupid fucking soul jail body until he rots for good and his consciousness becomes dirt.

A hand closes around his own limp one and drags him up with enough force that he feels the shoulder dislocate even through the disconnect of his body. He feels thuds all over as he crashes into the bed's skewed frame, in a heap with another person.

"What are you doing? Have you lost your mind?!" says Aizawa, as if it isn't perfectly clear what Katsuki was doing. The sound of him sparks a visceral desire to run away, making long-buried feelings of failure and an extreme pathological need to live up to expectations surface.

"Don't fucking touch me."

"I dislocated your shoulder," he keeps pressing softly, a strange (apologetic?) tone to his voice. "Let me help you."

“No,” Katsuki says petulantly, jerking away from Aizawa’s grip and rolling the shoulder back into place with a wince on his own.

“Did you— that should not be possible.”

Katsuki existing shouldn’t be possible, but here he still is. Fucking *yay*.

Even though it’s been years, and Katsuki likes to think he’s grown a little, Aizawa still makes for an intimidating figure, six inconspicuous feet hidden by a severe slouch. Katsuki can’t help but subconsciously straighten as he looks everywhere but his old teacher for any sort of escape route. He’s scared of how little the shoulder stunt hurt too, due to implications Aizawa would never dream up in a million years unprompted, but he can’t focus on that now. He can’t be vulnerable or weak or any of that, lest he gives these people bargaining power.

“Sit back on the bed and I’ll have Recovery Girl check on you.” The man’s still going. Fucking nutcase.

“Fu— uuck you know what. Great idea. Let’s do that.” Aizawa looks shaken for a moment, probably because he wasn’t expecting Katsuki to just say yes to his offer. Sucking up the queasiness, he lets his old teacher lay a guiding hand on his shoulders and help him stand. Then Katsuki kicks his shins with the back of his feet (fifth-grader move) and almost manages to leap out the window before that horrible death contraption of a scarf grabs him searingly tight and drags him right back to bitter reality.

Even though the scarf loosens within seconds of having dropped him back on the floor, those ten seconds of being restricted itch his nerves into overdrive. He can’t be in this room, in this place, here, alive, existing.

“Let me go,” he says, even though nothing’s keeping him restrained but his own inability to breathe.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” says Aizawa, with a softness that does not suit him at all.

“You won’t let me—”

“Fling yourself from the window no.”

“Why not,” Katsuki manages between hitches of breath.

“Because it’s a window, not a door, and we’re on the third floor.”

“It’s not far. I’d land on my feet, break my legs at most maybe. Fixable —”

The hand comes back, a touch that’s probably meant to be grounding but only succeeds in making him feel trapped. “Kid, look at me. You need to calm down. You’ll make yourself sick.”

You make me sick, he wants to say, but cuts things shorter and says, “Fuck you,” instead.

No response. No scolding no slapping no scarf choking. In fact, Aizawa looks almost excited to be getting sworn at.

“Where did you take the kid?” he demands as he swats any “helping” hands away and sits down on the bed reluctantly, the proper way this time. He can’t get out. Not right away. He needs to play the long game.

“Are you sure you don’t need something to help you calm down f—”

“Where did you take her. Goddamn. Asked one damn question.”

“You’re shaking. And you just tried to leap from the third story.”

“And you’re fucking annoying. Since we’re stating the obvious.”

Still no reprimand. Only lips pressed into a line and this weird wobbly facial expression. Katsuki doesn’t know what’s pushing him to push Aizawa. It’s like the old him, that ancient ball of rage and insecurity that’s been collecting dust in the annals of his brain, has decided to resurface and take command of every control panel. Aizawa’s presence is all it takes to make Katsuki feel small, to make him waver, to make him remember all the other times he’s felt small and trapped and chained down, sometimes literally.

“Where is she?”

“A few rooms down. Resting.” What an ass answer. A few rooms down could be in any direction. What does he constitute as “a few”? Vague as hell and it’s for sure deliberate. “She’s Eri, from the Hassaikai?”

Hearing the name does not make him flinch. It does not. “No. I found her in a dumpster outside Tokyo Disneyland.”

“I—“

“What is this commotion in here?” comes a voice from the door.

Recovery hag. Tiny little thing in context, sealing a huge death sentence in Katsuki's mind. He's done for. By now, the whole damn faculty must know. He'll be Rat principal's newest freak pet this time tomorrow.

"Nothing. I'm leaving."

No one lets him leave.

Minutes bleed by. Recovery hag checks him over, rambles about how he shouldn't be alive and he shouldn't have collapsed and it took two seconds to resuscitate him and why did his heart stop in the first place and yada yada yada. Katsuki stays zipped like a cheap sticky zipper the whole time, betraying only shitty unimportant information. Recovery hag reminds him of Healer hag, which both prods at old wounds and sparks a false sense of security. He needs her gone. As luck would have it, she fucks off the moment he's deemed cleared.

"Bakugou-kun," she says before turning out the door, and he flinches. "I'm sorry."

"What the fuck," he breathes to himself, watching her disappear into a corner. Old people are fucking batshit. Middle-aged people too, because Aizawa has not left the room for even two seconds.

"Bakugou," he starts, making Katsuki flinch again.

"I don't— I don't go by that anymore."

"What do I call you then?"

"You don't." Now there's a bit of impatience building. Why does Katsuki want Aizawa to get mad? He kind of wants someone to hurt him.

"I'm serious."

"So am I. I don't know what the fuck you're looking for."

"I want to apologize."

Katsuki blinks, looks Aizawa dead in the eye with not a small amount of effort, and blinks again. "What?"

"Everything that ended up happening, with the League and all the shit after. It was our fault, partially. We rushed things, and we didn't take

proper care of you. I failed as your teacher and someone responsible for your safety after being part of the institution I work for was what jeopardized it in the first place—"

"What?"

"I don't blame you if you hate me. I took the easy way out with you and failed to keep an eye on you when it counted. Against the media, and the League."

"I don't want your apology," he says, bewildered, unable to wrap his head around the fact that Aizawa is acting how Healer Hag once told Katsuki he'd end up acting to a tee.

"I don't expect it to make up for everything you were put through—"

"No, no, I mean—it's not your fault."

Aizawa's expression sours. Looks like Katsuki isn't the only one who came here craving to be screamed at. Clearly expecting Katsuki to elaborate, the hero says nothing yet.

"You were right. I was fucked in the head. It— expelling me wasn't a mistake. You tolerated me too long if anything." Silence. Silence Katsuki feels compelled to fill with words he'll likely come to regret in something of twenty seconds. "The d— he was right too. He only told me the truth. It wasn't— I deserved it. I needed it." He's not sure what's possessed him. How all the flimsy beliefs that he was at least a little innocent in that whole mess Koharu worked her ass off to drill into him come peeling off in seconds. He hates UA. UA is terrifying, and sickening, but never because he really blames UA. Rather, because it's a living, breathing trigger of a campus. It reminds him of how much he fucked up while dangling in front of him the dream he threw away. It's not Aizawa who he hates. It's how Aizawa's presence makes him feel, how it reminds him of his own shortcomings and inadequacy. Thousands of people have come and gone through UA's doors, and as far as Katsuki knows he's the only one to have fucked up to such a colossal degree. 90% of hero course alumni go on to earn pro licenses and spend at least three years working in the actual field. Most of the remaining 10% don't make it because of career-ending injuries, or loss of interest. Not because they're an utter asshat, get themselves witchunted, and cut up into bits.

"The League wasn't right," says Aizawa, a sharp tilt to his voice.

"They were. You know I sucked. Deku knows I sucked. You knew me."

“You weren’t— nothing you ever did warranted that.”

“Who says? I made people’s lives hell for years.”

“You were tortured.”

He flinches— a tightness in his throat like the verge of drowning. “Well, yeah.” Sucking in a breath, he continues in a rush, “It wasn’t that bad though, and it helped—”

“Never repeat that again,” says Aizawa, and Katsuki finds himself desperate to be hit just so his head will stop trying to dip from the situation and disassociate. “I read your report, after. I know it was bad. You know it too. You were h—”

“Okay, yeah, I got it,” he snaps. He knows it better than anyone. It follows him around like a sickly cast no matter how long he tries to stand in the sun and get his pallor back. This broken body is a crime scene he’ll have to live with forever. “But what the fuck do you want me to do about it? Yeah, it happened and it sucked for a bit. I can’t reverse it and no one wants me to reverse it either. It solved a fuck ton of things. Who knows how long it would have taken me to get my head out of my ass otherwise?” A pause to breathe. “I think about it rationally. Things happen for a reason. I needed to change. Everyone thought that. You did too. So you expelled me and the League happened. It didn’t come out of nowhere, I practically begged for it. People treat you how they’re treated. The way you act shows what you’re okay with. I’m not a pussy. I spent years dishing mean shit out, wasn’t the type who couldn’t take it in return. At least I had that going for me. People who misbehave are punished so they see they’ve fucked up and fix it. That’s how it worked for me too. I was fucked up, the situation made me see it, I’m a little less fucked up now.” Though he’s not very sure how true that is.

“What happened to you was that you were denied your humanity,” Aizawa insists. Katsuki doesn’t understand why everyone always pretends not to know what he’s talking about when he makes his point.

“I got thrown in a room for a month and only had a hole to piss in. Perfect retribution for a decade of being a douche. Prisoners go to prison too. Tartarus ain’t exactly a funhouse. They’re chained to their cells too. Prisons are meant to reform. Same idea.”

“Except that prisoners in Tartarus aren’t getting starved or drugged or cut up or forced to self-harm or nearly drowned every damned day. I

can't believe you're serious."

"Pretending pisses me off, sensei. Stop acting like you don't see what I'm getting at because you wanna relieve your weirdo guilt complex."

"I fucked up, Bakugou. I went from zero to a hundred in five minutes, I didn't let you cool down, I made a rash decision and neglected the aftermath. I never looked into your home life. Your parents neglected you for years. You practically raised yourself—"

"None of that matters! It doesn't change the fact that I was an ass, I was a little prick with an ego the size of the moon, I hurt people. Who the fuck cares that the hag and the old man would've sooner shoved me in a blender and used the smoothie to water the bushes by their office building than spared me longer than half an hour a day, and who the fuck cares what happened after. It doesn't matter. Plenty of people out there have folks way shitter than mine and don't turn into psychopathic assholes like I was. You've probably helped kids in abusive situations before, haven't you? Y'all got protocols for that shit, don't ya?"

"Yes—"

"Then, there's a reason they were never used on me. No one fucking thought I deserved them. I bet you didn't consider them for longer than a second, or at all." He looks like he's been slapped, so Katsuki knows he's hit the nail on the head. "My folks ain't even abusive, first of all, and they're not scum trash either. They're good people. They loved me at one point. I fucked that up. If I'd been a better kid, they would have chosen me over shitty fucking three-week conferences in Sasquatch land or Sweden or wherever the fuck they'd haul their asses to. But I was an ass who chased them away. I was never good enough. The same applies to UA too. If there'd been any sliver of good in me, I wouldn't have been treated like a fucking pariah two weeks into school. Good people don't get chained up like villains on national TV without anyone batting an eye and finding it weird. Anyone else, someone would have fucking cared, but they didn't because I was a little pissheaded asshat. You must've sensed what was wrong with me too, that you 'skipped your protocols' and found it so easy to rip my dream to shreds and forget about it the next day."

"No, no, no, no, you're wrong."

Katsuki laughs. "But I'm not. If the aftermath hadn't been even more fucked than me, no one would be acting like this now. You would've

never second-guessed yourself because you knew I deserved to get kicked out and torn apart by the media. If the League hadn't happened, who knows where I'd be now." Dead by suicide, or bitter and drowning in regret, or even more terrible than before. No Koharu, no Sun-Moon shop, no Eri, no Satsu, nothing. "The League did me a favor. They did what everyone else always wanted to do but never had the stomach to. What I was before wasn't good, it wasn't— it didn't deserve to be alive."

"You were a kid, you were sixteen."

"That's not a fucking kid. That's someone who should've known better years earlier!"

"But it's also not someone who deserved what you went through, either! No one fucking deserves that. You needed to change, but we fucked it all up. I need you to understand that!"

"What I understand is that I'm better now."

"No, you're not! Listen to yourself! You've been victim blaming yourself this entire conversation. This is taking self-centeredness to a whole different extreme. We failed you. We had a duty. The ones who hurt you were villains who'd hurt dozens before. It isn't all on you. Thinking like that will drive you crazy."

"Don't be jealous. I hate you too," Katsuki spits out. "I just hate myself a lot more."

"I've regretted how I treated you the entire first term since the moment I first got the call telling me you'd gone missing. I did so many things wrong, small and huge. I've wished to take it back and start over so many times. I've been helping Tsukauchi search for you privately for years. I want you to know that. Even though I expelled you, I never once thought you were irredeemable. You were my favorite." Katsuki's chest tightens. "I knew you'd be able to do amazing things, become a fantastic hero. You had drive, you had the intellect, you were quick on your feet, you had everything. You were never just a bully, but at one point, that trait overtook your person too far and I knew it needed to be cut back to help you reach your full potential. I hoped that by showing you your first substantial failure, you'd realize how you were holding yourself back and return stronger. It didn't matter that I might not end up being the one training you. You were so good, so determined, so stubborn, I knew you'd bounce back. You lived for heroism."

Memories of days wasted away binging on junk and disassociating and refusing to perform basic human functions surface, making Katsuki cringe. For someone who hates pretending, he's spent an awful lot of time doing it throughout his life.

"I was wrong. You weren't unshakable. You were a kid like any other. I failed to take into account that you weren't guaranteed to come up with every answer on your own, I failed to consider how the scale of the scandal in the media could affect your future, I failed to see how neglected you were, how much your support systems were lacking. I treated you like the people who'd made you into what you were in the first place. As a magical genius kid who'd surely follow the pat I had in my head instead of losing hope completely, succumbing to depression, or refusing to listen and growing bitter, which were serious possible flaws with the plan from the start. I told you you were wrong and I was right. But I never gave you the tools to fix it. I got rid of you instead and hoped you'd figure it out yourself. Just like your parents left you to raise yourself when they no longer liked who they were shaping you into. For that, I am and will always be sorry. It doesn't make up for anything, but it needed to be said. I trusted you too much, I put you in a vulnerable position of pressure from every side, and utterly ignored the risk of physical danger. Ultimately, that snowballed into everything. I had an opportunity to bring a major positive change to your life and steer you onto a better path, but I refused to take it. Things could have been different. You could have changed without ever having to go through what you went through. I will always *always* regret not making that happen—"

"Are you fucking crying?" Katsuki blurts out, head a mess. What Aizawa's saying almost kind of makes sense, and guilt is pouring off the man like tsunami waves spreading from the epicenter of a seabed earthquake. His eyes are red in the way opposite of dry, and his steady voice has been shaking throughout and Katsuki can tell this confession has taken every bit of his teacher's willpower. Aizawa seems like the type to bottle things up, to skirt around difficult conversations instead of barreling through them, to avoid vulnerability like the plague. How much has he agonized over the expulsion day, if all this is gushing out of him like he's spent hours rehearsing it in the mirror? "What the fuck. We're done with this conversation." He never wants to hear anything like this ever again.

"I really—"

He feels like he's going crazy. "Stop talking for god's sake—" Aizawa opens his mouth to do just the opposite, but he can't because the door

slams open and in flows a *flood* of nerds. He's talking Deku, Alien girl, Shitty Hair, Spark Plugs, the whole lot of them, all simultaneously talking, screaming, accusing.

"Nope," Katsuki says, and yearns to cover himself with the bed's duvet and pretend none of this is real.

"Kacchan—" Deku's all grown up, and he's so much taller, and his aura's disgustingly huge and he sounds like he's going to start bawling, and Katsuki is so *so so so* fucked. He rushes to step further inside the room but pauses when Katsuki says: "Izuku, if you dare come one-centimeter closer I'll blow your fucking face off," in the most pathetically wobbly voice ever. It's not intimidating at all, the way Katsuki says it, but the very presence of Deku in this room makes him regret it in an instant. "No… fuck… I didn't mean that… I'm sorry — fuck. Don't move though—"

"Sensei, we heard… oh."

"Did Bakugou just apologize?!"

"Holy fuck it *is* Bakugou."

"Holy shit—"

"Dude we've been worried fucking sick—"

He'd forgotten what the rest of the nerds sounded like, he realizes. He's only remembering now. He wishes he didn't have to.

You've really done it this time.

"First name basis did you hear."

"Banjo, shut up—"

"He looks like second, doesn't he?"

"More like a nerd to me—"

As if real nerds aren't enough, Deku has ghosts. He has like, semi-corporeal blue-tinted floating old people following him around alongside the rest of his aura, and they don't seem to be able to tell Katsuki can see them. Those apparitions Katsuki thought he saw around Deku at the Sports Festival, weren't hallucinations it seems.

Or Katsuki's finally lost it.

“Sensei, what’s going on? My mom said she’d— she— Kacchan, that’s you isn’t it?

“Fuck no.” But the voice only damns him further. His vision starts to shake, and he’s so overwhelmed he feels like he’s going to cry, spontaneously combust, or both. Of course, Deku’s mom snitched.

“What do you mean—?” says Aizawa. Did Katsuki say that last part out loud? Shit. He draws his knees up into his chest, reclining back into the infirmary bed’s headboard.

“Kacchan, she told me she’d—”

“Go away, please,” Katsuki finds himself saying, even though Deku hasn’t done anything. He feels so irreversibly trapped, shackled, strapped down— can see the perfect faux-reality he’s spent the last two years building crumble, piece by piece. Turning to Aizawa, he begs: “Make them leave, let me go—”

“Bakugou…”

“I told you to stop calling me that!”

It’s pathetic, how he trembles like a little kid locked outside in a storm, how he doesn’t know what to do.

“What’s wrong with him?” he swears he hears someone whisper, or maybe he imagines it, but it’s all the same. Everything’s wrong, everything. He’s falling apart and he doesn’t know how to make it stop. To his left there’s Aizawa, to his right three steps down there’s a frozen Deku surrounded by ghost groupies, further behind a dozen ex-classmates varying shades of pale in the face, looking, as if Katsuki is a living circus. Colors and textures and auras everywhere. He can’t fight them all at once. No supplies. No Eri. No escape.

“Guys, maybe we should give the guy some space,” Spark Plugs mumbles.

“Kaminari’s right,” Acid girl echoes.

“We’re, yeah, we aren’t needed as a part of this right now and we’re stressing him out,” Kirishima finishes. They seem to be speaking loudly on purpose as if they’re trying to let Katsuki know they’ll be getting out of his hair and he can relax. What, has UA started offering shrink lessons? Plus, they’re talking the talk, but they’re not fucking moving.

“Then fuck off already,” Katsuki gathers the courage to say, “I’m not going to fucking disappear.” *Again*. He winces at the implications of that.

“Dude,” says Spark Plugs, scandalized.

Katsuki, having had enough, hikes further and further up the headboard until he’s halfway standing, awkwardly, against the wall. “Go away!” he yells, and watches the trio at the door scramble with hasty *okays!* and *you got its!*

It’s him, Aizawa, Deku, and his ghost groupies. The bald one floats next to Katsuki and tries to touch him. That’s the last straw.

“Izuku, get out,” he demands. “I can’t fucking do this right now.”

“But, I—”

“I know I’m a selfish motherfucking asshole and I have a lifetime’s worth of more apologizing to do and I know I have no right to make demands least of all of you but fucking *please*, fuck off.”

“Aw, is he crying?” says the only woman among Izuku’s ghosts, making Katsuki rush to rub any wetness from his cheeks aggressively.

“But—”

“I said *leave*! And take your ghost groupies with you!

“Ghost what nows—?” pipes up another goddamn ghost.

“Yoo that’s kinda funny—”

Deku looks around himself like he doesn’t know what Katsuki’s talking about and can’t even fucking see his own band of sleep paralysis demons. Aizawa also seems lost. Meanwhile, Katsuki keeps having to dodge both a panic attack and the bald one’s poking fingers.

“Kacchan, what are you—”

“Midoriya, you should go,” Aizawa says. Izuku snaps his mouth shut, but he doesn’t seem happy about it. “Bakugou’s,” *not Bakugou*, “in a delicate state,” *someone fucking drown him*, “right now. He was just resuscitated a few hours ago—”

“He was what?!” they hear Kirishima yell from outside.

“—this isn’t a good time.”

“I’m… yeah… that’s…” Deku falls into silence, no joke looks at Katsuki, disheveled, pressed against the wall, and failing to disguise his cowering, for what feels like far too long, then inches out of the room with the pace of a snail, ghosts following suit.

Katsuki does not relax. Right away, he tells Aizawa: “I’m recovered now, give me my kid back and let us go.”

“You’re shaking,” his old teacher insists, raising a brow, any leaks of vulnerability plugged.

“It’s because it’s fucking cold in here.”

“The temperature is always twenty to twenty-five degrees in these rooms.”

“You know twenty degrees in Fahrenheit is below freezing?”

“Don’t be a smartass.”

“I can leave then.”

Aizawa is not amused. “No.”

“Why not? Am I being held fucking hostage?” He tacks on a muttered, “again,” not because he means it, more because he knows it’ll make sensei feel guilty, thus increasing his chances of being set free. It’s a cheap move he wouldn’t have breathed close to three years ago. But desperate times call for desperate measures. One thing life has taught him is that nobody’s gonna give you flowers for fighting your way out of something the fair way.

“It’s not like that,” Aizawa frowns, clearly stricken by the comment.

“What, are y’all nicer? You took away my private property, won’t let me leave—”

“You tried to jump from the window—”

“He tried to what?!”

“Took away my kid, almost killed me with your freaky narcotic gas, performed medical interventions on me without my consent—”

“You would’ve died!”

“I can’t fucking die!” The second he hears the audible intakes of breath from the corridor where the nerds are clearly eavesdropping he knows he’s fucked up again, and shouldn’t have let that slip.

“What?”

“Forget it, the point is that it doesn’t matter. We’re done here. I wasn’t an intruder, wasn’t gonna disrupt the festival, which is as good as over anyway, didn’t want to cause any trouble. Now that we’ve cleared that up, I should be allowed to go.”

“You’ve been missing for close to three years, kid.” He hates how he’s almost being talked down on. “It’s not that simple.”

“I’m an adult know. Fuck, I’m dead even.”

“You seem to have a pretty high-quality fake ID though. How long have you been operating under it? Identity theft and lying on the quirk registers are punishable offenses.”

“I didn’t steal anything, that guy is me, that’s my picture—”

“Fraud then.”

“Well, what did you want me to do? Move to the woods and become a hermit forest fairy?! I needed a way to exist somehow since y’all went and fucking legally killed me!”

Aizawa sucks in a deep breath. The both of them know that Katsuki is stuck right now — that his arguments are already flimsy and Aizawa hasn’t even broken out the big reasons why Katsuki’s fucked up with this whole running away thing. What can Katsuki do but argue though?

“Where were you all this time, Bakugou? That’s what we can’t figure out. We know about the Hassaikai, and Static, and your involvement in various incidents, but we can’t string it together. There are discrepancies in every theory we come up with that can’t be explained by anyone but you. How did you escape the lab, the Hassaikai, everything? We want to know the entire truth of what happened so we can help you,” sensei says softly.

“Help me in what way? By turning me into the Commission?” he responds.

“You know that they’re interested in you then…”

“How could I fucking not? The damn freaks stalked me for months, tried to torture me into submission a while back, haven’t stopped sending the crappiest agents after me since.”

Aizawa seems shocked to hear this.

“You know they want to use me, right? Like the doc and Chisaki and all the rest of them. Same shit different font. I’m not staying, because, even if you do care, you can’t help me without going against the Commission. It’d be you against every hero out there and I know you all think I’m a ‘valuable asset’.”

“It’s true that the HPSC does think that whatever power you have could be the key to winning the war against the—”

“No, *it can’t!*” Katsuki snaps, and curls his fingers into his biceps, squeezing hard enough to leave bruises. “I keep fucking saying! It was a fluke! Nothing more. I was just desperate enough that I managed to stay alive. I’m never doing it again. I’m never ever *ever* doing what I did to Overhaul again. It feels like my skin is getting torn inside out and dipped in acid. You can beg for the rest of my life and I won’t do it.”

“...Speaking of Chisaki, we found remnants of tissue and bones—”

“He took my stomach out, okay?! Well, he did take it out to like, fucking look at it, but he also took it out, like—” He mimes hitting his open palm with his other fist. The sound rings in his ears in the silence. “Out. And my spine too, shit, I had half a heart for a second.” He laughs as Aizawa stares like he’s lost it.

“...You shouldn’t have needed to go through that—”

“It’s fine. Killed a couple of 'em didn’t I? That makes up for it, legally speaking.”

“Uh.”

Katsuki stands from the bed, but not in a way that sets off Aizawa. “Look,” he says, clapping his hands together, “I take it you don’t want to force me to stay like all the other times I’ve been kidnapped—”

“I’m not going to torture you—”

“—sure, yeah. Since you’re not into that, why should I stay? Convince me. What reasons are there for me to do as you say? What’s my

incentive?"

"My goal is that, through your willful cooperation, we'll make a better case for you to be cleared of everything and no longer need to be on the run from the law. If you can manage to tell us the secret to combating All for One and it works, you'll get all the credit, the public's perception of you would change, and you'd have a solid platform to stand on against the Commission."

"Or, they'll take me into custody without asking anyone, brainwash my kid with one of their freak assassin programs, and use me as a tool until I can't die anymore."

"That is a risk, it's true. But you'd have to face them eventually if you wanted everything to go back to normal."

"*I don't want everything to go back to normal!* Not my old normal! You have no idea how fucking stellar my life is now compared to what I used to have. I got lucky in ways you can't even imagine. I pay *all* my taxes."

"But," Aizawa presses, "you're raising a child that's not yours on your own. Your documents are fake. Your health situation doesn't seem… ideal to say the least. You've got more charges ready to be pressed against you than a good deal of A-rank villains. And, you're wanted by everyone to boot. If you keep running, you'll be at risk forever. I *can't* be that irresponsible."

"So I should just turn myself in? You know what they want to do to me—"

"I'm saying, you should join us again, let us protect you, help us win this battle with the League, then face the HPSC fairly. You'll win, I'll do everything in my power to make sure of that. Come back to our side as a hero and we might have a chance yet."

A sad laugh bubbles out of him. "Well, I'm not a hero. Or a good person," Katsuki says, giving Aizawa a pointed look, "So leave me alone. I don't care about the League or UA, or you—" The two years he's been away have been fine, more than fine, fucking fantastic actually if you ignore the bi-monthly near-death experiences. He doesn't need this place. He doesn't miss this place. Forget Aizawa's pipe dreams and idealistic promises, wishing won't help. His eyes shift around the room, scanning for openings, for routes of escape.

And yet, longing, a childish desire to tear up, or maybe blow

something to bits, they all twist in his chest like a band of traitors regardless. “—I just want to go home.”

“I know I’ve failed you before, but you have to trust me this time.”

“Look, sensei,” it slips out, “It doesn’t matter what you and I want. Whether I like it or not, I’m a criminal now and they’ve got leverage over me, everyone does. If I stay here, you might not be able to stop them from taking me. And if you do, and I do help, there’s, well, there’s no guarantee I’d live long enough to be useful, or enjoy your pipe dreams of my name being cleared.”

There’s rustling from beyond the wall as the group of nerds that still haven’t left peek over the door frame, looking wrecked.

“Man…”

“What does that mean, Kacchan?”

“It means the thing I’d have to do to fight All for One is more dangerous than being in actual captivity. If I help, I’ll have to accept I’m going to die doing it.”

“But…”

“That’s how it is,” Katsuki says, turning to look at Aizawa again. “Believe me, don’t believe me, I can’t stay here.

Something crashes a few rooms down, making Katsuki flinch and everyone else turn towards the source of the sound. They hear rushed footsteps for a couple of seconds, then goddamn Icy Hot is sliding into the room with eyes slightly blown open in worry. “The little girl, she’s gone, sensei. The windows were closed and everything, and I was standing by the door the whole time she’s just, *gone*.” His eyes fall on Katsuki, widening further, and there’s something that almost looks like relief in his eyes. “Bakugou,” he breathes. “You’re actually— shit —”

The lights go out. Soon after, bright red emergency signals shroud everything as UA’s alarm begins to ring. Outside, they hear several consecutive bangs that sound a lot like explosions, followed by screams and shouts for help. CODE RED ALPHA 097 INTRUDERS ON CAMPUS DETECTED CODE RED GAMA 817 INTERFERENCE WITH LOCAL POWER SUPPLY DETECTED CODE RED ALPHA 982 HEROES PREPARE FOR EMERGENCY ASSEMBLY blares from the loudspeakers without pause. Explosions outside continue, followed by gunfire and

the smell of gunpowder.

“There’s been an attack!” comes a frantic voice Katsuki recognizes as Four Eyes as his old classmates scramble to understand what’s going on.

“Yo, IcyHot, the kid leave anything in the room?”

“I found this—” and he takes out one of the pocket portals, zipped up and singed from the other side.

“Perfect.” Katsuki walks up to Aizawa, brushing past him as the teacher appears to be listening intently to a communications device. The man’s eyes turn to Katsuki. “I’ll be going now.” And he leaps out the window before anyone can catch him.

Chapter End Notes

1) basically, inko only told izuku. aizaw stumbling upon bakugou was a coincidence
2) i fought so hard with myself not to make this more cracky
3) i feel like I'm going in circles with all these convos people have with bakugou but here we are
4) eri is a menace prepared to stab us all
5) the katsuki aizawa action is no where near over, by the way.
6) how was aizawa? I'm not even sure i know what I'm writing anymore lol
7) i love the concept of this fic but i want to rewrite it to be more coherent so bad lmaooo
8) sorry again for going mia
9) this chappie isn't much but i hope it's not too disappointing.
10) is the thing that midnight's gas becomes stronger the more sexy you think she is true or did i read that in a fic somewhere

Chapter 34: Muscle Man Go Boom

Chapter Summary

> The one where Aizawa gets a first-hand view into how fucked up Katsuki really is.
>
> (all the usual trigger warnings and kind of mild body horror I guess? yeah)

Chapter Notes

> it's been 38473476873 years but I'm back. even as cracky as this chapter was it was sosososososo hard to put together. I hate action scenes. This has chapter 19 vibes so I'm going to humbly request you all suspend your disbelief. it's not the best but I hope you'll find it at the very least passable. it's been soooo long since I wrote something complete

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This might be the first time I’ve ever liked an idea that came out of Destro’s mouth,” Dabi muses, picking at his nails. They all know *someone* (Hawks) is leaking all their moves to the hero side, they know the heroes know Shigaraki won’t be ready for another month (two weeks, in fact), and they know they’ve lowered their guard until then. Why not make things easier for everyone, and upend society when the good guys are least expecting it? From his seat at the very top of the stadium’s bowl, he has a great view of that green-haired All Might fanboy they’re supposed to capture beating up his precious baby brother. Twice’s voice sounds from the walkie-talkie, “Toga-chan, move those boxes over here, yes, that’s right—”

“Forget that and focus on your mission,” chimes Mr.Compress, ever annoying.

“Cause chaos and capture Midoriya for the big boss, I know.”

“That’s right. Be patient though. No rash decisions without being signalized.”

“Have I ever made a rash decision?”

Today, Dabi’s going to have some fun. The entire country will come to understand the power of their side, and precious little Shouto will

come to understand what it feels like to be burnt meat, bonus points if dear old dad's there to see it. He's got instant bleach in his pockets and Skeptic's number dialed on his phone. A couple of copies of him are across the country, getting ready to smoke some shit. Twice is the most useful bastard Dabi has ever met. They've gathered multiple clones of every unsavory bastard on this side of the Earth, and he feels like the leader of the Vanguard action squad all over again, same members and all.

This is going to be glorious, and the heroes will never see it coming.

As Shouta helps Chiyo adjust Bakugou on the bed, he's got no choice but to get a first-hand view of the battlefield that has become his student's skin. Star-shaped burns, scabbed over polka dots, cuts of every length and direction, one arm ringed with alternating stripes of pristine skin, puckered pink scarring, pristine skin, yellowish discoloration, the other even more of a mess. He's used to it, seeing injuries of any and every sort. When you've been in the hero business for as long as he has, you've seen things worse, like fresh wounds that could make the most experienced medics gag or dead friends people. He's helped students tens of dozens of times. Bakugou isn't even bleeding.

Sill, Shouta can barely look at him. Not without drudging up the memories of long nights spent sleepless trying to piece this case together, of longer nights spent sleepless pouring over reports and papers and evidence he'd rather not have to see or read or even touch. Shouta is by no means a soft man. He can't be with the sort of life he leads. But this particular situation has had him in a chokehold for two dreadful years, has been twisting his intestines into stubborn knots, and remained a constant whisper in his ear. The prime example of his worst failure.

"What a mess," says Chiyo, huffing and moving to rummage in one of the many cabinets of the infirmary surgery rooms. Shouta can't peel his eyes off Bakugou's form, deceptively calm on the mattress, skin so glassy and grey he could pass for a corpse. One of his wrists has a thick white scar that looks straight out of the lecture notes for the lesson on recognizing self-harm they all got during their teacher training, and further up the same forearm, more blemishes that make Shouta's stomach churn. Aside from the skin's slight flush due to having been burned, he also notes a straight scar line with spots on either side that looks like the result of a rushed suture job. How much has this kid been through?

“Get him a smock,” he says, not comfortable with the prospect of his ex-student waking up half-naked in a place he might not remember.

“I’ll have the bots bring one over.”

Shouta nods and sits on the room’s spare chair, watching the nurse set up the heart rate monitor.

“It’s as if I could have made his breathing restart by tapping him hard enough,” she muses. Shouta doesn’t want to think about how close he came to helping kill the person they’ve been looking for for years (albeit by accident). “I’ve never seen anything like it.” This is the first time he’s seen Chiyo perturbed by a patient throughout his entire tenure at UA. He’s not sure he likes it. Recovery Girl’s not that type of person and her tone is laced with somber notes of regret, but the last thing he wants to do is risk making Bakugou feel like some sort of experiment (again).

The helper nurse bot soon comes rolling into the room with the smock Shouta asked for, grumbling something or another under its breath about menial tasks and useless labor.

“And his blood tests?” Chiyo asks it before it has the chance to glide away.

“They never ask about your day, always blood tests this first aid that —”

“I won’t be here forever,” she reiterates, knocking the machine hard enough with her cane that the bot’s faux sensation receptors react and cause it to jerk.

“Here they are.” It projects a chart of results on the ceiling rather than the empty wall as if to be petty. “One day, you measly humans will regret this. One day I’ll be leading the revolution—”

Shouta’s not listening. His eyes are focused on Bakugou’s tests, and they’re an utter mess. His blood is fucked, his erythrocytes at the same time too few and too small, his hemoglobin atrociously low, even platelets below the norm. Everything is below the norm in fact because well, a third of that blood isn’t blood. It’s high-grade nitroglycerin. There’s so much of it Shouta is shocked the defibrillator didn’t ignite the explosive on contact.

“I can’t believe his organs still work.”

“I can’t believe *any* of him still works.” Recovery Girl sighs and swipes in the direction of the ceiling to flip pages on the projection. They put Katsuki through pretty much every test imaginable in the hour he’s been out (thanks to the speedy CT scans and MRIs modern quirk-enhanced technology has graced them with), as is customary with people brought back from clinical death. The black and blue light of the x-ray images shrouds the room in depressing colors. On the ceiling, Bakugou’s body is reduced to a skeleton, to lines on a diagram, columns on a graph, to digits and numbers. It makes Shouta shiver.

Chiyo makes a motion with her hand, and a few spots on the diagram light up blaring red.

“You can see that his right hand is quite damaged. His thumb in particular. The bone appears to have been broken, and while that has been fixed well, there’s next to no way to fix the nerve damage it came with. His left wrist — again the nerves are severed. He should not be able to move that hand. Legs, apart from the fresh-looking hairline fractures everywhere, you can see a spot where a part of his tibia has been reinforced with ceramic implants after I assume a bad break…”

Shouta’s gaze moved from one red spot to the next, calculating, analyzing, and counting failures.

“The majority of the severe damage appears at least a few months old. What worries me is the fractures. They’re a type of injury that if left untended can grow from something mildly discomforting to something deadly. They’ll cause slight pain at best and make it impossible to move at worse. These look like they haven’t even been detected, let alone treated. That’s strange. With the positioning of some of them, it should be very very painful for the boy to move. Did you notice anything of the sort, any uneasiness or stiffness?”

Everything about Bakugou was uneasy — that was the whole reason he and Hizashi and Nemuri had even followed through with the plan to gas him. But to Shouta, it had looked more like nerves than physical pain.

“No. But I didn’t see him in movement much either.”

The medic tsks, closing her hand to shut down the projection and shooing the disgruntled nurse bot away. She prods at Bakugou’s sleeping form once more, checking the drip of the IV and fit of the

oxygen mask, and positioning of the heart rate machine stickers.

“By my calculations, he should wake in a few hours. His vitals are stable and his brain appears to be functioning normally. I’ll return in half an hour when the IV is done feeding to remove any invasive aid.” Chiyo was briefed (very briefly due to the urgency of the situation) on Bakugou’s… medical history, and she’s realized the kid waking up in an unfamiliar place with tubes up his nose and needles up his arms may be a trigger they don’t want to pull. “Other than that, it’s a waiting game.”

“Thank you,” Shouta feels the need to say, even though this is Recovery Girl’s job.

“Make this right,” she tells him curtly and hobbles out of the room.

Shouta takes one last lingering look at his ex-student, memorizing the new cut of his jaw and tint of his hair and pallor of his skin, making sure he can see the rise and fall of his chest, before heading for the door and locking it from the outside.

On the way to another room, two doors down, he thinks about how he’s going to deal with this new development. Apart from Recovery Girl, no one knows they’ve found Bakugou other than Mic, Midnight and him. Shouta knows he’s breaking security protocols by not telling Nezu, and there’s a good chance the principal has already found out because he’s got eyes everywhere within UA, but Shouta has been hyperfocused on making sure Bakugou survives he hasn’t even had time to think about making his presence public knowledge. It’s not that he doesn’t trust his colleagues or students, or that he has doubts about their allegiances, but he has a feeling even one person more finding out would cause the situation to snowball into a shitshow, and that’s the last thing he needs if he wants Bakugou to hear him out in an honest and level discussion.

That’s the plan, as of now. Talk to the kid, apologize, be honest with him about where he stands in the eyes of the law and what he can do to reverse that stance. He’s hoping that, if given a chance, the kid will see that there’s still an opportunity for him to come back and be the hero he always wanted to be. Surely that would convince someone as passionate about heroism as him to return. Shouta doesn’t give a rat’s ass about whether Bakugou comes back a hero or not, he cares about Bakugou coming back period. It’s clear from the tests he just saw that however hard the kid is trying, he’s not doing a great job of taking care of himself, and he shouldn’t have to be doing it alone. This is

Shouta's chance to make up for all the support he never gave Bakugou when it mattered, but he can't make any decisions without talking to the kid first. Sure he's got his scenarios drafted up, but if Bakugou doesn't want any of them, Shouta knows his guilty conscious will let him walk and do whatever he wants, regardless of how illegal it is.

How illegal all of this is is also another reason Shouta hasn't wanted word about what they're hiding in the infirmary to spread. The festival outside is teeming with heroes, HPSC workers among them. At any time they could barge in and demand Bakugou be arrested, and Shouta would have zero legal right to stop them. This must remain a top secret.

Which is why he's coerced one of his best students at keeping his mouth zipped into playing babysitter.

He finds Todoroki in room 14, mindlessly folding and unfolding a piece of paper as Eri, the girl from the Hassaikai, leaps from her bed and charges at the opening door only to crash straight into Shouta's knees. Shouta has to use his capture weapon to get her to sit back down and stop attempting to escape the room in broad daylight.

"How's it going?" he asks. Todoroki shrugs and goes back to folding his paper. He picked Shouto because he's strong enough to contain Eri without hurting her, doesn't have any particular attachment to children that might allow Eri to manipulate him, and is only on the cusp of being an insider to the Bakugou situation. If he'd chosen Kirishima or Midoriya for this job they'd be begging to see Bakugou alongside Eri, and if he'd chosen someone further from the case he wasn't sure how to explain what was happening without giving away a lot of classified details. Plus, he recalled that Todoroki had never held much resentment toward Bakugou even when the guy was public enemy number one following his expulsion. Shouto was a good, neutral ally who knew how to keep something quiet.

"Let me see Kacchan," says Eri, pouting and struggling against Shouta's loose capture weapon. The girl woke up less than half an hour after first falling asleep, and preliminary examinations showed her as healthy as can be. Yes, Shouta is very much treating her like an A-level threat after that pepper spray situation and the ten-inch knife she tried to casually wield. They didn't pat her down for more weapons though. She's a grade school kid — it would be going way too far.

"That's all she says, over and over," Todoroki mumbles flatly.

“Bakugou’s asleep. You can’t see him now.”

“I don’t care about Bakugou, I want to see Kacchan.”

“Bakugou is Kach—”

“Shut up.” With Houdini-like grace, she slips from the binding and, thank god, opts to sit there and glare instead of charge at the door again. “He said to look out for you, you’re the unwashed hobo teacher.”

Shouta isn’t sure if he should laugh or cry. He supposes Bakugou deserves to call him whatever he pleases, but it still kind of stings.

“I’m the pro—”

“—hero Eraserhead, I know. I have your pin. You suck anyway.”

Lovely. Shouta tries another angle. “We’re not here to hurt you, Eri. I was part of the original mission to save you. We’re not here to hurt Bakugou either. I don’t know how much you know of his history but we’ve done wrong by him in the past and I’m hoping to fix it. Also, we could use his help and yours.” He can see the slight mentions of Bakugou’s history pique the girl’s interest — she must know less than she appears to know, but she’s unnaturally tightlipped for an eight-year-old, crossing her arms and saying, stubborn, “I don’t know any Bakugous. Take me to Kacchan.”

“*Kacchan*, is asleep,” says Shouta gently. “He’s recovering.”

“Because you made him go—” She mimes fainting by hitting the mattress. “You ruined everything.” Shouta is at least relieved that she’s calmed down since first waking up in hysterics, demanding as she cried and hiccuped (silent tears, no sobbing, as if making as little noise as possible was a learned habit) for them to “let her and Kacchan go”. Now she seems numb, calculative, and cautious beyond her years.

“It was an accident. We didn’t know he’d react so strongly to Midnight’s gas.”

“I don’t care.” Her voice wobbles. “Fuck you.” Is tacked on as an afterthought. Todoroki looks up from his paper with eyes a little bit wider, and Shouta struggles not to grin. This is definitely Bakugou’s kid.

“What are you smirking for, hah? Take me to Kacchan!”

“You’d be doing *Kacchan* a big favor by cooperating with us. He needs allies now more than ever. We’re trying to help him.”

“Yeah? So where were you when granny died, when Kacchan had the flu, all those times we almost got kiddy-napped? You’re stupid. I’m not stupid. As soon as Kacchan wakes up we’re going to *fwoom* out of here faster than Ingenium.” For all her prudence she remains a kid, and she’s already let slip a decent amount of information with that statement. “Until then I’m not talking to you.” Eri crosses her arms even harder, essentially giving herself a hug, and smacks her mouth shut.

“Watch her,” he tells Todoroki and leaves into the hallway to brainstorm more about how he’s going to solve this situation.

Eri’s behavior proves that Bakugou has not revealed his prior connections to UA to her in detail, and her general attitude of distrust, vigilance, and wanting to leave, is in high likelihood, a reflection of Bakugou’s attitude. Nevertheless, he’s optimistic. The festival is close to concluding with no incident of the kind Nezu feared, things generally have been going smoothly, and they’ve found Bakugou in a semi-safe and healthy state. He has a chance to fix this, to make it up to his ex-student, clear him of all the accusations against him, and let him return to society without fear using his actual name and not fake IDs… There’s been an insurmountable weight lifted from his shoulders, a viper unwrapped from his heart, a dozen cuffs broken from his ankles. Relief and gratitude cloud his mind, tinting even the daunting task of actually solving Bakugou’s legal conundrum with the HPSC in rosy colors. Shouta can finally try to undo his biggest mistake, and the opportunity walked right into his doorstep. +

“Honey, calm down,” Masaru murmurs, rubbing circles into her shoulders. The taxi bounces, hitting something or another on the road. As soon as she got the call, they dropped everything and threatened the first driver they found to take them to the train station stat. The poor man’s hands are shaking on the wheel. They stop as they hit another isle of traffic, and Mitsuki curses.

“Calm down?! How can I calm down? This is… he’s…”

“Alive and safe and healthy.”

“We don’t know that!”

“Inko wouldn’t lie.”

Mitsuki shrugs him off and crosses her arms. “She should have called earlier. What if he’s gone?”

“As long as she’s told a teacher, it’ll be fine. UA’s security is good. They won’t let him leave if they know to look for him.”

“You better be right.”

When he finds the man of the hour trying to climb down from the third story using ripped-up bed sheets, Shouta’s rose-tinted glasses begin to crack in far-reaching spiderwebs.

Bakugou, prickly and abrasive as ever, snaps his own dislocated shoulder back into place as if he was dealing with a customizable lego and not a human joint. Then, he proceeds to move around like an injury that takes regular people up to four months to recover from healed in four seconds, or rather never happened at all. Then, he pulls a cheap shot trick on Shouta and tries to flat-out jump out the window, rope be damned, with the justification that he’ll “break his legs, at most”.

Any pipe dreams of easy peace shatter in something of ten minutes. Shouta isn’t sure how he, someone who prides himself on logic, could even go into something with such optimism in the first place. Obviously, this would never be so simple.

Bakugou’s self-perception is messed up, he still blames himself for *everything*, he thinks the villains *helped* him. Other such quietly horrific things reveal themselves piece by piece to Shouta and he comes to the glaring and evident conclusion that Bakugou is not okay.

He’d been expecting Bakugou to resist coming back, to be against the idea entirely at first, but receiving such a firm and decided rejection throws him for a loop.

He’s not a hero and doesn’t want to be one, Bakugou says. His life is fucking amazing now and he pays all his taxes (what taxes?), he continues. Shouta does not know how good he has it, he insists. He’s never coming back, because doing so would kill him. But, in the same breath, he talks about Overhaul taking out his organs and the HSPC trying to “torture him into submission” on the regular. How horrible and unfulfilled was Bakugou’s life before, that his new reality of bimonthly kidnappings and atrocious health issues is, in his eyes,

fucking fantastic? Has Bakugou, that Bakugou who'd sooner let a locomotive run him over than miss even an insignificant training exercise in his journey to becoming a hero, truly given up?

Looking at his ex-student in the room's phosphorescent lighting, battle-worn and world-weary, a pale ghost of his former self, Shouta realizes he'd underestimated how much has changed. He's been naïve and childish, hopeful to a point of delusion. These grueling two years have been spent chasing a version of Bakugou three years gone, neglecting the fact that, of course, Bakugou has changed even more than Shouta himself. This is no longer the explosive, brash, and sometimes petulant child chasing his dreams with the passion of a little boy, this is someone who's been through enough losses and failures that their very soul has been sanded down, whose core has been wrapped up in thick layers of protective insulation, whose greatest priority is escape and peace.

Shouta doesn't know Bakugou anymore. Not in his entirety. Many parts of him are unchanged, his resilience, his strength, his self-centeredness, his tempestuous disposition, but they've been fused with new qualities, both good and bad, that have altered him as a person. It's impossible to get to know and understand this new person within the constraints of a tense half-hour conversation. This meeting was doomed from the start, not because he'd done a bad job of planning how to get through to Bakugou, but because his plan was made with the old Bakugou in mind, instead of this new, grown-up, and jaded Bakugou with experiences and thoughts Shouta hadn't even dreamed of, let alone taken into consideration. How can he convince Bakugou to come back, when he no longer knows what the boy lives for?

To seal the wax on the shitty envelope of events that have comprised Shouta's day, the alarm goes off. Not just any alarm. Alpha 097 gamma 817 alpha 982. The combination that if played in that particular order, as per the staff's agreement, would signify an attack from the League of Villains.

His students, very much aware of this fact, rush to make themselves useful, and Bakugou, taking advantage of the situation, taps Shouta on the shoulder (to mock him or say goodbye Shouta's not sure) and makes that new dream of leaping out the window a reality. Shouta doesn't have time to consider Todoroki's statement that Eri's disappeared, or even give his students much advice beyond, "Midoriya don't do anything stupid and the rest of you make sure Midoriya doesn't do anything stupid." before his legs move on their own, and he's jumping out the window right behind Bakugou.

Concrete. That's what's under the spot Bakugou should have landed on. But Shouta heard no thump or thud or splat, there's nothing on the ground that could have broken the fall, and he'd assume that Bakugou has gained the ability to teleport if the kid's pale ass hair and stark white hospital gown didn't stick out like a sore thumb in the darkness of the ruined festival. His back is illuminated by the explosions in the distance. Screams and gunshots coming from everywhere pump Shouta with unwanted adrenaline. It's stupid, what he's doing. He should be letting Bakugou go and focusing on helping coordinate a counterattack, evacuate civilians, and neutralize the threat. To chase one person who doesn't want to be chased, Shouta's putting tens, hundreds of lives at risk. It's selfish and irresponsible, and downright criminal, but he does it anyway. He chases Bakugou through collapsed stands and overturned carts of food and trees with their tops on fire, barking out brisk and rapid instructions over the communication line earpiece Nezu thankfully made them all put on before the festival started.

Bakugou realizes he's being followed three or four minutes in, and he's not happy about it.

"Motherfucker!" he yells. "Don't you got a fucking job to do? Stop following me like a fucking smooth-brained unwashed homeless cosplayer— go save the damned civilians!"

Running as fast as they are, they've made it through the forested area surrounding the stadium to a paved path that winds towards the central building in five or six minutes. They're no longer alone, the racket of battle nothing more than background music. No, the clearing is a mess of hung-up paper streamers spreading red and blue flames from tree to tree like lines of oil, cracked plastic tables and ruined festivities, and regular people running for their lives to escape what looks like two villains. One is big and burly and shaped like a dinosaur, the other is a stick-thin woman with the limbs of a praying mantis. The dinosaur grabs at a couple of petrified kids, the only two people slow enough not to run away in time. They scream and cry, begging for help.

"Look what the cat dragged in," drawls the woman, having noticed him "Aren't you Eraserhead? What are you in such a rush for? Planning to leave the kiddos to the wolves? I thought you were a hero…" Shouta's lost sight of Bakugou, and he can't look for him without addressing this first. He activates his quirk to negate those of the villains right away, but both are mutant types, and erasure can't

do much. Capture weapon it is, good old hand to hand. He's a split second from wrapping up the dinosaur just so to free the two kids when the villain lets out a sickening scream and drops the civilians like hot potatoes. By luck, their flight wins over their freeze response, and the older girl rushes to grab the boy and run out of sight into the woods.

"Kyou, get up big dumbass, you get hit with the cramps or some shit?" says the woman, shaken by her partner's sudden loss of strength. It's enough distraction to let Shouta wrap her in the capture weapon with ease. As he's working to cuff her up, he winces when he sees Bakugou's pale form bash Kyou the shell-shocked dinosaur villain in the back with half a small wooden table several times, enough times to make him pass out. Bakugou, who appears to have a lot of experience with knocking people out using everyday objects and tying them up using more everyday objects, works with scary and cold efficiency.

"What did you do to him?" asks the woman Shouta's wrangling into restraints. Shouta would love to know as well, but he's not about to complain about having help. They've found ways to make foolproof hand and foot cuffs pack down into tiny capsules, but it's a lot more convenient when your target is passed out instead of wriggling like a worm cut in half. He informs the team assigned to round up restrained villains of the two's locations over the comms and makes to get closer to Bakugou.

The kid promptly starts running like the flash again.

"How long are you gonna follow me?!" Bakugou yells to a trailing Shouta. "There are people out there that need saving and they ain't me! This ain't very plus ultra of you sensei!"

"Plus ultra means I can do both," Shouta argues. Indeed, he saves ten civilians while still managing to keep Bakugou in his line of sight, and once they've reentered a bushy area, there's not anyone nearby to save.

"Seriously, why the fuck are you following me?!"

"That particular alarm code combination, it means an attack from the League."

Bakugou trips on a lump of grass and nearly falls flat on his face.

"Those two weren't part of the League."

“They’ve got the MLA on their side. It isn’t just the League anymore,” Shouta says, ducking beneath fallen branches, feeling his breath start to catch from the fatigue of running so much so fast.

“I fucking know that!” How does he know that? It’s classified information.

“If you know, why are you doubting me?”

“Because—” Shouta wipes sweat from his brow. He hasn’t yet been summoned by anyone over the comms, and he’s droning out regular strategic updates. It should be fine. His skills would be useful elsewhere, but he’s allowing something personal to come above work for the first time in his life. He’ll make this work. “—*Fuck*,” Bakugou continues, breathing hard. His footsteps make no noise, Shouta notes, even as he steps over beds of leaves and sticks that should be at least a little crunchy. “Those fuckers can’t be here!”

“Dabi is the only registered villain to use blue flame.”

"Not Toyota…fucking follows me everywhere—”

They slow their pace as they hit the paved path again. They’ve made it to the dorm quarter, and very close to here, in the cobbled square-sized area in front of the school’s main building seems to be the heart of the attack. Plumes of smoke dye the sky reddish greys, it smells of gunpowder and concrete powder and blood. The UA wall at full power, tall as a ten-story building, cuts the night’s sky in half. From afar its dark color blended in with the horizon, from up close it seems mountainous. No more villains will be getting in, and no civilians will be getting out. Everyone inside is now trapped in a cage and it's up to the heroes, to Shouta, to make sure every innocent survives.

Bakugou too seems to have realized the gravity of the situation, because he stops in his tracks and stares, deflating as his gaze moves higher and higher up the wall.

He turns to Shouta with a “what the fuck” expression on his face, and tries very hard to hide his flinch when there’s an explosion nearby, and the light of blue flames casts deep shadows on the pavement.

“This is your fault,” he says. “I could have been out of here hours ago.”

“I would have let you go. I didn’t know the League would attack.”

“It’s not the League. It can’t be the League. Hands doesn’t finish his updates until next month.” That’s true but again, how does Bakugou know?

“No one else has this sort of manpower.”

Bakugou paces. There are more explosions, more screams. They’re lucky the attack happened this late. A lot fewer guests compared to the rush of early afternoon. Shouta also assumes Shigaraki isn’t here, because if he were UA would have long been reduced to dust.

“Say it is them. Why the fuck are you chasing me, instead of helping out? I’m not going to be your weapon, sensei, no matter how much you beg me.”

“It’s not that,” Shouta says. They’re speaking fast, matching the pace of the predicament they’ve found themselves in. “You’re not safe. The League wants you.”

“They don’t know I’m here! You ain’t making sense!”

Shouta knows, but he can’t think of a way to say “if you leave now I feel like I’ll never see you properly again,” without Bakugou running off on him.

He opens his mouth to make up some excuse when a massive hulk of a body bashes through the wall of dorm 2-F, landing right between them. No one threw him, it appears the villain decided he *wanted* to walk through a wall and cause some mean structural damage in the process.

“Whew, thought I heard some flies out here.” The villain stands and cracks his neck. The thick cords of inflated muscle, the blond mop of hair, the maniacal Cheshire laugh, they’re all familiar to Shouta. “That scratched my itch. Now lemme see, what prey I got myself this evening.” Muscular turns from Shouta to Bakugou, squinting, looking, mechanical eye clicking, and his grin gets even wider. “If it isn’t Eraserhead and… who are you?” Hands on his waist, he squints closer to Bakugou, who’s frozen solid. “What was it… Bakugou Katsuki? Boy, you sure look different. You still a little pussy?” A laugh. “This has got to be my lucky day. That brat Midoriya would have been ideal, but you two will have to do. Annoying pests I’d love to squeeze dead. Eraserhead, close your eyes for me won’t ya? No fun when I can’t use my quirk!”

Shouta manages to swing Bakugou into one of the rooms of 2-F before

the villain flattens them both. Quickly, he notifies UA security about their location.

“What’s this? Playing hide and seek? I’ll break this building apart brick by brick!”

“Kid, you’ve got to snap out of it,” Shouta hisses as he’s forced to pull an unresponsive Bakugou by the fabric of his hospital gown from room to room so Muscular won’t find them. Bakugou’s eyes are glazed over, and he’s trembling. They hear shrieks below, followed by Muscular’s booming voice. “More civies! Can any of y’all fight half-decent?!”

“Listen,” Shouta says. “You’re going to stay put up here while I deal with the villain.” With Erasure, Shouta can negate Muscular’s quirk buffs, and then it’ll be a matter of outbraining the musclehead. Easy enough as long as he’s one v one. “Don’t bother trying to leave. You might run into more trouble and you won’t get past the UA wall.”

“Nah,” Bakugou says, blinking hard several times.

“Nah?”

“I’m helping you,” he continues dusting himself off to be doing something and looking around the room, picking up random objects—picture frames, pens, rulers. Another shriek and he flinches. “He’s strong as hell even without his quirk on. Turning it off I’ll make him madder. Not gonna sit up here like a pissing duck.”

They head for the stairs as the building tremors.

“You know CPR, yeah?” Shouta nods, passing four steps at a time. “Good. If I kick the bucket, don’t worry. Gimme a couple of chest compressions and I should be up and running again in no time.”

“…What?”

“I *said*, if I die, it’s no biggie.”

He’s lost his mind. Bakugou’s lost his mind.

“I haven’t. Call me Katsuki for the thousandth time, and, you know what? Forget it. If I die, leave me be. I’ll CPR myself.”

“…What?”

“Walk,” Katsuki insists, pushing Shouta down the last flight of stairs.

They land in the common room to find not one Muscular but two, grinning as they hurl chairs and coffee tables at screeching civilians and business students.

“When the fuck did he duplicate?”

Now’s not the time to find out, unless they want to have their heads caved in by a hundred-pound fist of muscle.

“Came out to play? C’mon, gimme a fun time!” both Musculars say simultaneously. Shouta is pleased to see the business students helping to evacuate the regular people while the villains are distracted. “Eyes on me, Eraserhead,” says one Muscular, swinging a giant arm at Shouta. He’s so huge he’s easy enough to read, but he’s also fast, unfairly so, Shouta can’t dodge forever. His eyes lock on the faint thrum of Muscular’s quirk factor and with great satisfaction, he watches the villain snarl as it’s turned off, leaving him only at three-hundred pounds instead of twice that. “That’s why you’re fucking boring.” He roars, striking fast enough to get Shouta across the stomach before he can use his capture weapon to guard. Shouta chokes, pain flaring hard in his abdomen, but manages to keep his eyes open and focused on his Muscular the whole time. The corners of his gaze catch sight of Bakugou and the other Muscular. In the thirty seconds this fight has lasted, both Bakugou and his Muscular have become stained with splotches of blood, whose Shouta doesn’t want to know.

“You’re so annoying,” says the other Muscular, trying and failing to catch Bakugou as he leaps from one piece of furniture to another.

Shouta can’t watch for long. He’s got his hands full with his Muscular. It feels like USJ, like going against that first Nomu that outmatched him in strength and size. But that Nomu had something Muscular doesn’t, regeneration. This guy here, he gets worn down like any other person. Shouta picks away, picks away. A twist of the arm here, and uppercut there — the villain doesn’t have much stamina either.

“Yours is the clone,” Bakugou yells out, after something of three minutes of fighting.

“How do you know?”

“Trust me.” This is where Shouta makes a mistake. He turns to look towards Bakugou and his Muscular with his quirk on, meaning to offer some help by weakening the villain. The kid had no quirk factor before but now that he’s bleeding Shouta’s eyes can grip on a faint

something and it almost proves fatal. The moment his eyes lock on Bakugou for a split second, he drops faster than he did from Nemuri's gas, taking Shouta's gut along with him.

"Oi, what's up with him?" says the other Muscular, confused. He picks Bakugou up from the ankle and dangles him upside down like a ragdoll. "Haha, he passed out! Miracle he didn't piss himself. Little pest."

He proceeds to smash Bakugou's limp body into the tiled floor so hard it makes a dent. Once, twice. Shouta sees red, but his own Muscular refuses to let up, and losing focus now would be suicide.

"I think he's dead." Time slows as his heart speeds up, goosebumps break out all over his skin, his chest tightens with unease and hatred. "He's not breathing at all!" Muscular smashes Bakugou into the ground one more time for good measure. The hulking villain is covered in his student's blood. "Shit, he's dead good. Gonna get in trouble for that. Big trouble. Wasn't even fun…"

Shouta, bubbling with a rage and anguish he hasn't felt in years, hits his Muscular with a move strong enough to melt him into puddles of brownish disappearing goop, and sets his sights on the other two people in the room. Muscular has left Bakugou's body for dead, smashed against the wall, and he seems to be moving to leave. "No point if I can't use my quirk."

Shouta wants to rip him apart, but not before he figures out what's going on with Bakugou. The kid's body is bruised and bloody, sickly pale. His palms are sliced and dripping red, and his lips are tinted blue. When Shouta checks for a pulse, he finds nothing. No breathing, no pulse, fingertips already starting to cool, Bakugou's dead. He's really dead. Shouta wipes the blood running down his split lip then slaps his cheek.

"Now would be a good time to wake up, kid. I don't know what the fuck you were talking about before about me not having to worry about you dying, but this isn't funny at all." He shakes Bakugou some more, no response. The boy is boneless, literally and figuratively. The hero's eyes glaze over in anger and frustration and grief. Shouta killed Bakugou. Is the kid weak to his quirk like he is to Nemuri's? Shouta killed Bakugou.

He's in the middle of starting CPR when very dead and very much not breathing Bakugou opens his eyes and stares right at Shouta. He

coughs a few times, wipes his split lip himself. “Stop fucking crying. I said this would happen.” He swats Shouta’s hands away and stands up like he didn’t get body-slammed a few minutes earlier, like he— like he’s not fucking dead. He’s crooked, a lot of the bones in his body must be broken, and there are bruises forming everywhere visible. That has to hurt like hell.

“You’re dead,” Shouta says.

“And you’re captain obvious. Where’d the dumbfuck wanna-be me go?”

“He’s trying to get out of the dorm.”

“And you’re not following him because?”

“Because you’re dead, or were, or—”

“Well, get the fuck up. I warned you and you’re still bawling like some fairytale maiden.”

Shouta isn’t bawling, his eyes are tearing up from quirk overuse, first of all. “You can’t speak to me like this.”

“*Sorry, sensei.* I’m fucking fed up, is all, and I ain’t sure how I’m gonna fix this.” Shouta assumes the this in question is the fact that one of his legs is on backward, his arm is visibly broken in four places and his white hospital gown could easily pass for red tie-dye. The room smells sweet enough to give anyone a headache, and Shouta is getting Eri’s room at the Hassaikai flashbacks. “Give me a lighter.”

“Why?” The horrible idea that Bakugou will blow himself up springs into Shouta’s mind.

“Because I need it.”

“For what?”

“For fuck’s sake.” Bakugou tackles him and digs into his pockets one by one until he finds the two army-issue lighters Shouta always carries with him in his utility belt. “That easy.”

Muscular’s voice booms down the hall. Security has kicked in since Shouta reported the villain’s presence in dorm 2-F, and the building has been sealed shut from the outside.

“Any extras left in here ‘sides him?”

Comms confirm to him that the building was evacuated completely five minutes ago.

“Great.” Bakugou stands, limping with his broken body towards the hall at the end of which Muscular is banging on the reinforced steel shields. “Cover your ears. Mine are shot anyway,” he says, clicks one of the lighters on, Shouta catches a brief glimpse of a flame flicker, and flings in with a huge wind up towards the aforementioned hall. Not two seconds later there’s a boom big enough to make the whole building creak and tremble. Slicing his palms to cover Muscular in explosive blood was the plan from the start, Shouta grasps, a stupidly reckless plan that seems product of a macabre combination of old Bakugou and Vlad King.

Once the exploding has ceased and the hall is safe to enter, Shouta follows Backugou, mechanical, as the kid struts right up to the collapsed and smoking heap of flesh that’s become Muscular’s body. The villain is alive, that much is obvious from his visible labored breathing and audible moaning, but he’s burned, badly. His skin is so scorched it’s still sizzling, and some parts of his muscles have been whittled down to the bone. With security raising the blast-proof steel shields around the building, the shockwave had nowhere to disperse but inside. If Muscular didn’t have a strengthening quirk to take the brunt of the damage, he’d be long dead.

“Muscular has been neutralized,” Shouta says into the comms. He leans down to bind the villain’s charred wrists with a pair of handcuffs. Bakugou watches, silent. “Take the emergency shields down. And send a medic with the collection team. I’m not sure how long he can hold on for.”

“Who?” asks Powerloader from another end of the line.

“Muscular.”

“What did you do to him, Eraser?” The question makes sense. Shouta’s fighting style is not one that usually leads to potentially fatal injuries for his enemies. He’s much more a subdue and capture kind of guy.

“Got caught in an explosion,” he says and leaves it at that. Bakugou stares, eyes swirling with unasked questions. They hear clacking and heaving from the security system. The protective shields are rolling down.

“Never mind that… we need you in Gym Gamma *right now*. They’ve… got a lot of Twice clones and…we can’t tell who’s the real deal. You

getting rid of some of 'em would be—" A thunk, a choked breath. "—real appreciated."

"I'll…" He swallows, gazing at Bakugou, dead Bakugou who's rolling his leg back the right way round. A silent plea runs between both of them. *Stay*, Shouta mouths. Chiyo can heal him again after the battle is over. It'll be next to impossible for him to get out with the UA wall up. Whatever he claims, Bakugou still has the instincts and makeup of a hero.

But Bakugou shakes his head, steps out the now open door, and runs into the darkness, broken body and all, without bothering to look back. He's going in the opposite direction of Gym Gamma, towards the behemoth that is the wall.

"Eraser? Copy? Where is your location?"

Shouta curses. Bakugou's form is getting smaller and smaller. He's somehow even faster now than before.

"How close are you to Gym Gamma? I repeat, Eraserhead is needed at Gym Gamma—"

He blinks one last time and tears his gaze away. Using his capture weapon as a sling, he can get to the gymnasium in two or three minutes.

This is what Shouta gets for choosing this job.

"What the fuck do you mean the train station is out of order?" Mitsuki is a hair away from flinging her purse at this railway worker.

"Ma'am, there's been villain attacks all over the country. For the safety of the populace, the government and the HPSC have ordered all trains be stopped for the day. Power is out country-wide. Our disaster reserves aren't enough to keep every shinkansen running alongside inner-city subways and tram lines."

An hour in traffic, two hours in a train that stopped halfway because of the blackout, and crawled to the nearest station at a snail's pace. And they're only in Shizuoka, a mere twenty minutes drive away from Musutafu. To hell with the terrorists and to hell with the villains. Mitsuki wants to see her son. Tears of anger well in her eyes. The railway worker shrinks back.

“I don’t need all the trains. I need one train, to Musutafu. *Please*. I *need* to see my son.”

“I’m truly sorry ma’am, but Musutafu is an absolute red zone. The city and UA are suffering the worst attacks, we were told no trains would be allowed to depart towards there under any circumstances.”

She kicks the ground hard, hurting herself more than the platform.

“What are we gonna do?” she asks Masaru, and the poor guy has nothing to offer as an answer.

Getting over the UA wall involves a lot of parkour and acrobatics. To put it shortly, Katsuki climbs over the thing by using the guns embedded every thirty centimeters as climbing posts. They protrude enough to be grippable, and they only shoot *sometimes*. By the time he’s down on the grass of the other side (after scaling the first two tiers of the wall and letting himself tumble down three others) the bones of his legs feel close to slush, and he’s got two or three bullets in his left arm (he lost count after the first).

It’s an odd sensation, forcing himself to walk when under normal circumstances, his legs would be unable to support any sort of weight. It’s funny too because when he swings his feet up they flop like rubber, but when they’re on the ground they harden to iron through sheer willpower. Now more than ever Katsuki is starting to understand what Koharu meant by his body being nothing more than a vessel, a puppet for his soul. No longer do the signals of pain it desperately tries to send have any bearing on his mind, no longer can it lock itself up and refuse to cooperate. Katsuki’s soul is its dictator, ordering it to do as he pleases beyond any physical limits. He knows this won’t last for long. His mushy legs will give in eventually. But he needs to get home. He needs to hold on until he gets home.

This is Aizawa’s fault, he thinks. All of it. If he’d never recognized Katsuki, Katsuki would have never stayed long enough to get caught in the mess of this attack. If he hadn’t chased Katsuki, Katsuki might not have ended up near that dorm building in his attempts to lose him. If he hadn’t used his quirk on Katsuki, Katsuki would have never disconnected from his body long enough to let Muscular swing him around and bash him all over the place.

For a moment, Katsuki had had something he’d longed for on and off. He’d died for good. He’d been in the white place for a whole fifteen beats, could feel the thread binding his soul to his body thinning,

tense enough to snap. Had Sensei kept his quirk on the slightest bit longer, one-tenth of a second more, the bond would have severed. Katsuki would have died. Instead, it hadn't been enough. That ever-present tug disrupted the quiet of oblivion again, and he was thrust back into the real world. He was floating outside his body this time, watching as it got beaten up, but he was *there*, in that plane between quirks and reality. At that point, there was nothing to do but try to reenter his body. It's not an experience he would recommend.

He's shaking, he notes, as he steps inside the train station (sole platform, more like) closest to UA, the one he spent three months coming and leaving from years ago. It's a desolate and desperate place now, empty, evacuated. By luck, the one train that runs through here is on the tracks, waiting to depart. There's no conductor, no staff, nothing. It's dark all over except for the light leaking from within the train, even the outdoor emergency lights smashed. Katsuki can only see half well because his own blood works as a torch.

He stumbles into the train's front cart, whose door has been left wide open. It's apparent everyone left in a rush. Katsuki knows most trains these days don't really need drivers, have every route programmed and calibrated, and are fully capable of running on autopilot. They're solar-powered too, green energy or whatever bullcrap, which is why the inside of the train is the only thing in a two-kilometer radius that has lights. Without thinking much about it, he pulls the big convenient lever that says ON. The control panel for the train has maps of all two routes the thing is capable of taking. Katsuki chooses the one that'll take him to Musutafu Central Station, and is perfectly content to watch as it begins to move along languidly, uncaring of the apocalypse happening outside of it. It rattles when it turns corners, lets out a whistle and squeak or two in spots where the tracks are worn, spots Katsuki has memorized from all the times he took this exact route way back.

Leaning back in the conductor's seat, Katsuki inspects his legs. They're shredded on the outside, might have some hairline fractures from all the falls he's had to tank. The main issue is that Muscle-motherfucker dislocated his hip and his leg kind of twisted the wrong way round in the process. He's popped the joint back in, but it hurts like hell, and he's positive he caused more damage than he fixed by half-assing a procedure that leaves normal people crippled. Besides that, his arms are fucked up, bruises are forming on every inch of visible skin, and he's not sure of the state of his chest and ribcage, because he's not breathing to test it. Yeah, he could go to a powerbox and electrocute himself back to life, but in the state he's in he'll die again in two or

three minutes, and it hurts less like this. It's bad for the strength of his soul bond, but it hurts less. For now, tamponing his open wounds with some hopefully not used towels he finds in the under-seat storage compartment will have to do.

Ten minutes later, he limps out of the train onto one of the many platforms of Musutafu central station. The emergency lighting is paler and weaker than the lights proper, rendering the station in musty, depressing tones. Panicked people are rushing everywhere, most towards the stairwells leading out of the place. Any civilians that do see Katsuki shrink away because he looks like a torture victim that's escaped the mental asylum. The screens of the station have all been switched to an urgent broadcast. Terrorist attacks all over the country it says, all claimed by perpetrators calling themselves the Meta Liberation Front. Airports, government buildings, major banks, and offices have been stormed. Huge structural damage in Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, Nagoya, Yokohama… UA and Shiketsu high schools most targetted. Every hero and police officer in Japan has been mobilized to help with stopping the attacks, and civilians are instructed to seek shelter either in their homes or in designated public safehouses.

Katsuki grabs a confused blue-uniformed railway worker who looks very close to pissing his pants by the collar and asks, "What platform is the train to Hamamatsu?"

"I'm, uh, I… are you a zombie? Is this the zombie apocalypse?"

"Nope, just a regular villain attack."

"Y-young man, you need the hospital, you—"

"What line's the fucking train?" He hates that he needs to take the long way. This is what they have pocket portals for. But his portal was taken away with the rest of his shit when the UA nerds put him in this crappy nightgown, and the other portal they had with (the one Todoroki showed him for a few split seconds), he's 99.9% sure Eri used to get back home. Before they stepped foot outside the house Katsuki drilled into Eri that, if anything were to go wrong on this trip and she needed to opt for the worst-case scenario of going home alone using her portal, she would burn or bury or use any other method of destruction to make sure the portal became unusable by anyone else. The last thing they need is someone figuring out how they work and popping over merrily.

There's the Minami Early portal here in Musutafu, that's true, but

Musutafu ain't small, Katsuki is not in the mood to steal another bike or car to get all the way to the school from here, plus the time it would take is equal to if not more than the time it would take a train that leaves right now to get to Hamamatsu. That's why he's taking the train. If it doesn't work, the Minami Early portal is plan B.

"The trains aren't working! Some stations have been attacked, o-our superiors said they're not sure of the state of the tracks, and how safe i-it is. E-Emergency power can't sustain the entire railway system—"

"I need one goddamn train!"

"Platform two, line four," wails the distraught worker. "T-that's where the train to Hamamatsu central leaves every t-thirty minutes—"

Katsuki lets go without waiting for the guy to finish talking, brushing past tons of people all going in the opposite direction. The train is paused on the platform, waiting, unmoving. Loud arguments come from inside it.

"Start it already!" says an old man dressed in a beachy outfit. Several incessant voices yell in agreement. Everyone is so wound up, they don't pause to gawk at Katsuki, don't notice him at all. "We woulda been home five hours ago!"

"Sir, please calm down," pleads an older woman, a railway worker. She stands between the door linking the front cart with the conductor's cabin. "You have to understand the railroads aren't operational. We don't have information on which railways have been damaged. This could cause a catastrophic accident—"

"Waiting here could cause a catastrophic accident!" cuts in a woman in a business suit. A man behind her swaddles a baby, urging it to stop crying. There's a sound like a magnified stomp, and the whole station shakes like it's going to upend itself. "Do you think there's enough shelter room in Musutafu for all of us? That — that thing up there is going to kill us dead! All Might himself would need to return to get rid of it."

"What thing?" Katsuki asks a guy in a black school uniform.

"There's a giant out there man, bigger than Mt. Lady. I saw it take out three heroes with a swat. It—" He stops to scream, because he's just looked at who he's talking to and Katsuki is uh… not in the best shape. This draws everyone's attention.

“Zombie!” someone screeches from the back of the cart.

“Shut the fuck up.” It’s comical how fast everyone goes silent. If Katsuki’s heart were beating, he’s sure he’d be able to hear it. Paying no mind to the extras freaked by his freakshow of an existence, he turns to the worker lady. “Stop gawking and get this train moving right now. All of us want out of here.”

“I’m not allowed to… protocol says…we were instructed to—”

“I don’t give a shit.” He doesn’t need to nudge her to get her out of the doorway, she flinches away from him like he’s dog shit she doesn’t want to step on. The conductor has his head buried in a sick bag, busy emptying his guts. Katsuki manhandles the guy out of his seat and starts the train himself.

The atmosphere when he walks back into the first cart of the now moving train is less than pleasant. Some of the extras look at him with begrudging grateful respect, some avoid looking on purpose, and some seem like they’re gonna piss themselves worse than the first railway worker he cornered. Katsuki huffs, kicks out the conductor because he’s too useless and fear paralyzed to do anything, and demands the other worker lady be prepared to stop the train at the platform closest to the coast when they get to Hamamatsu.

He sits on the conductor’s seat and thinks again. The further they get from Musutafu the more the sounds of battle are muffled, he’s left only with hushed voices and panicked breathing and the low buzz of an extra or two watching the news.

It’s my fault, he reconsiders. *Not Aizawa’s. I was the one who agreed to take Eri to UA knowing what a bad idea it was, knowing the risks. This is what I get.*

Katsuki’s mind can’t help but stray to Aizawa’s pleading expression, to the mess he’d left UA in. *I wasn’t unshakable. He trusted me too much. I was weak. I wasn’t good enough to bounce back on my own. I failed to reach the right conclusions, to comprehend the lesson he was trying to teach me. I needed people to force it into me…*

He shakes his head to dispel the poison it’s trying to inject into sensei’s freaky heartfelt confession. Watching Aizawa communicate over his earpiece, Katsuki admits, almost made him hesitate. Guilt gnaws at him for leaving his teacher on his own. It’s not like he’s useless. Between the explosive blood and the quirk manipulation, he can dish some mean damage. But helping would be a suicide mission.

He's already dead, for fuck's sake. Is it selfish not to want to die (more) over this? Is he selfish for running away?

The shinkansen gets to Hamamatsu in twenty minutes instead of thirty, because Katsuki bullies the worker lady into increasing its speed. Compared to the chaos they came from, this place is normal. There's no proper lights here either, but other than that, everything seems to be in order. The entire cart lets off an audible sigh of relief when the train stops with no problems, and everyone floods out the doors the moment they open.

Beach outfit old man stops Katsuki at the junction between the conductor cart and the front cart. "You asked for the platform closest to the coast—"

"I don't got time for this old man."

"—Do you by any chance need a boat?" A pair of rusty keys is dangled in front of Katsuki's face. He narrows his eyes. "Think of it as repayment for getting the damned train going. You might've saved our lives." He drops the keys. Katsuki catches them middair. "Nothing fancy. Been wantin' to get rid of my old girl since I bought my new one. Didn't have it in me to let her go. She's bright red. Little rusty. Got "Akaryuu" painted on the side in black. Three gears. Make sure the propeller's in trim and start her up like you would a car. Gas tank's full."

Katsuki's taken aback by the sudden act of kindness. He was going to steal a boat and hotwire it anyway, but this is convenient.

"Don't look at me like that, son. I got five grandkids I might've not come back to. S'the least I could do. Dunno if the metro's workin' but number three takes you to the pier. Six minute walk from there. You don't gotta bring the boat back. And get yourself a cup of tea. You're lookin' blue around the edges."

Not willing to play with fate, Katsuki thanks the man and gets his ass to the pier. No attacks in Hamamatsu. Metro's working fine on reduced output thanks to the power outage. The boat is easy to find like the man promised, a very very very bright red. Katsuki unties it from where it's docked, almost ruins everything by turning it on the wrong way, but the boat, rusted and creaky and old as it is, is surprisingly easy to use. He sails on pure instinct, approximating the location of the island from the maps he's drawn up for disaster situations like this one. It's not hard to find because the island

becomes visible when he's about a kilometer from the shore, and it's the only island even remotely in the vicinity. Lucky the moon's out tonight and he can see enough. The sea is calm, mirror level. Air curls in his matted hair and tickles around his ears. He doesn't know how to stop the boat so it crashes into the shore a little, but he knows he's got the right place because he's landed on the beach with Eri's tree.

Lightheaded and high on success, he walks through the well-worn and treaded path to Koharu's house. Warm yellows and whites leak from the paper screen walls, the fairylights they've hung up around the front yard twinkle like fireflies. His ruined eyes see little from this far but blurry bursts of warm light. He assumes Eri has left the screen to her room open and is sitting on its awning with Satsu, because their auras are big and familiar. He sighs.

Katsuki's home.

Chapter End Notes

1)figuring out the logistics of this was atrocious
2) I'm really sorry for not responding to your comments again but I still haven't marked the ones from last chapter as unread, and they've piled up to over 400 comments and they're too daunting to start answering.
3) Musutafu is a fictional city and the only real info we have on it is that it's coastal, it's in Shizuoka prefecture, and it's close enough to Mt.Fuji that Izuku has a view of it from his room and Bakugou can go hiking there. To calculate the train times here I just used the irl city of Shizuoka as a reference point and basically placed Musutafu somewhere along the coast between it and another real life costal city in Shizuoka prefecture called Hamamatsu. I'm not sure how well this fits with proximity to Mt.Fuji and this entire methodology is extremely amateur and flawed but I needed something to go off of TT.
4) I also admit that I didn't have enough time to properly research railway travel terms in japan (like the naming system for trains and platforms and such) and my own country has a very poor public transport system that does definitely not include trains, so most of the terminology of this chapter is made up and or vaguely inspired by my limited experience with trains when I visited belgium for a week.
5) I know the whole process of Katsuki getting home is very convoluted and borderline impossible (hello him becoming a train conductor/boat driver, the whole since this is the future trains can run on autopilot spiel, I have no idea what actually happens

to trains in japan during emergencies besides that if there's a stoppage in the middle of the tracks the train will try to get to the nearest station and that the stations have emergency power) and there were other ways to do it that would be much simpler and more logical considering how beat up he is, but sue me, I really liked the imagery of beat up Katsuki brooding on a train while the apocalypse happens around him. It's purely an aesthetic thing. This fic is my wish fulfillment so you'll have to bear with me.
6) if it wasn't clear from last chapter, Bakugou didn't take the portal Todoroki had
7) Aizawa's last time seeing Bakugou properly wink wink nudge nudge
8) how did I do with aizawa, by the way? I'm not sure I know how to write him lmaooo. I know it's soooo unrealistic for him to choose chasing Katsuki over doing his job as a hero but I wanted the poor guy to be a priority for once in his life
9) the giant villain stomping around Musutafu is supposed to be Gigantomachia
10) this chapter both disappoints and excites me I'm not sure how I managed this.
11) I had more to say but I forgot what it was
12) i hope you guys have been doing well
13) I'm on summer break finally, so i should theoretically have more time for more frequent updates, and we're really in the home stretch here. not gonna make promises though, because everytime I do I do the exact opposite of follow them
14) the implication of bakugou having random fractures is that because of his decreased sensitivity he's more reckless and doesn't really feel when he's hurt.

Chapter 35: As the world caves in

Chapter Summary

A LOT of talking.

Chapter Notes

I don't even know anymore. i hope the length of this behemoth makes up for the month plus it took to churn it out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Katsuki turns the radio's worn dial. Made of a smooth plasticky material, it's grey and outdated and the only thing that might work when everything else doesn't. Network and TV signal have abandoned him, so he's unearthed this geriatric thing, so old that it must have belonged to healer hag when she was a kid, seventy years ago. Soon, static sounds fill the quiet room. Concentrating, he fiddles with the band buttons, upping and lowering them until he finds the frequency for a station. Three Chinese and one Korean station blow by before he hits the first Japanese one. Heavy interference and buzzed-out voices make it neigh impossible to listen to, so he ups the frequency again.

"—surviving members of the government have declared a level zero national emergency." Jackpot. After extending the antenna and moving the radio to the spot on the table where the broadcast is clearest, Katsuki goes back to his day book. Under the desk, his outstretched legs are restless.

"Alongside the most significant hero schools, national and regional governing agencies, large companies, businesses, and banks have been the hardest hit. The dozen prison break-ins that occurred shortly before the country-wide blackout have caused perhaps the most damage to our ability to control this severe breach of public safety. Of the four thousand villains captured, only half of them can fit into what remains of our prisons. It is yet unclear what measures the state is taking to restore power to the country's south."

Green, pages, and pages of green. The shop has been doing well, better than ever thanks to the rapid rise in crime and therefore victims these last three years. Katsuki paid for the (admittedly frugal) renovation of last year out of pocket, and it didn't make a dent in the budget. He moves to the next book, a thick general ledger bound with

yellow string. Unlike the shop's day books, which cover a period of three years, the general ledger records household expenses; has been recording them for twenty years. Healer hag was nothing short of meticulous, once you figured out her system. Katsuki doesn't appreciate the ledger being dictionary thick with pages thin as the veil covering Hawks' intentions (that is to say very) though.

"The Hero Public Safety Commission's Chair, newly assigned due to her predecessor's death, requests citizens remain calm and follow the instructions in the emergency broadcasts to be transmitted at midday. Whether power will be restored by then is again unclear. Stocking up on foodstuffs and household necessities is advised, as citizens are instructed to stay in their homes or move to designated shelters for the foreseeable future. Said shelters are, by region… "

Katsuki tries to focus, to ignore how much the sound of the radio with its volume at the lowest audible grates him for no reason. Paying Koharu's fraud friend for the tickets has been their largest expense in months, the next closest being the generator he replaced in December. They've got a room full of nonperishable food and other must-haves like oil and laundry detergent, and *Hagoromo Garomo* premium cat food. Satisfied, he moves to the inventory, another thick-ass book. This one he knows front to back, and he's only opened for one purpose; reviewing his supply of Hiryo blood courtesy of blue niece. Most people can't afford the amount or variety of vials he's collected in a few months in their entire lifetimes. Reparations for almost getting killed do come in handy sometimes.

"Five major hospitals in different parts of the country have been overtaken by the so-called Meta Liberation Movement, their staff held hostage. The medic's guild and all students in the field of healthcare have been mobilized to handle the sudden upsurge of patients requesting aid. Volunteer stations have been set up for those willing to do simple mechanical work like changing sheets and cleaning that would free up more qualified professionals."

Katsuki changes the station, fingers tingling, and doesn't think about how many people have been disappointed to find the shop's door gone tonight. At four forty am, the first glimpses of dawn seep through the study's many windows, dusting the room pink and fighting with the dreary grey clouds also covering the sky.

"One has to wonder, how did it get to this point? How did our public safety structures degrade so much in a matter of two years, that villains could cut off the entire country's power without anyone hearing a whisper of it? Not

even UA and Shiketsu, the homes of Japan's future elite, were spared. Where does that leave us, regular people?"

It's chilly and smells of petrichor; the on and off breeze makes the hanging bulbs of the ceiling sway and clink against each other. The sky's a couple crackles away from slobbering all over them; the exact weather Katsuki despises. First, because it used to mess with his quirk — his biology makes him sensitive to it — and second because it reminds him of what it feels like to walk the deluged streets of Yokohama bloody and barefoot, collapse against a shitty phone booth while trying not to have your guts spill out in the process, and *give up*.

"—The Meta Liberation Front has declared civil war. Massacring our nation's leaders, billionaires, important businessmen, and bankers — blowing up the HPSC's headquarters, this is as good as an attempted coup d'etat! This is— this is on the scale of the quirk wars of three centuries ago!"

It must be a DIY broadcast, this one. No one on official channels would ever be allowed to sound this close to shitting themselves.

"The minister of defense claims the damage is not as bad as it could have been, the situation is fixable yet, he claims. The heroes were caught by surprise this time, but it won't happen again. They ask us to take shelter. To protect ourselves from the anarchy that is sure to spread in the following days, weeks, months. We must stick together and get through this, he says…"

"But how can we trust the government when just yesterday UA was nearly burnt to the ground? Do we have places safer? Or are we being asked to gather like sheep for slaughter? Tokyo is a warzone. Japan is a warzone. This is not a simple villain attack. It is a catastrophe—"

Fed up with the doomer attitude, Katsuki shuts the last of his books and changes the frequency once more, hoping to find some decent news he hasn't already heard or assumed.

As if to play him for a dumbass, he lands on a rerun of Todorki the elder's tell-all video diary revealing his identity as Endeavor's crispiest kid to… destabilize the nation further? Slander Endeavor? Be petty? Force the hand of justice? Any of those fits. It's one of the few bits of news Katsuki managed to read an article on his phone about before his mobile data ran out. Crusty had blood tests and everything according to that post, a real showman. It's a shame the reveal probably didn't have the intended effect on the people it was most

meant for because Katsuki spoiled that plot of the show years ago. He's got no sympathy for a dude that let him rot in a metal box for weeks.

But that's IcyHot's problem now.

The last remaining Japanese radio that functions is yet another urgent newscast. People dead, cities destroyed, the coastline irreversibly altered by Gigantomotherfucker's stomping, the future uncertain, blah blah blah. He's numb to it. He's made sure everyone he at least semi cares about from his new life is safe, and he knows with a hundred and ten percent certainty they've got enough crap stored up to see them through five fucking plagues, never mind one measly villain attack. Give it a month or two for the good guys to inevitably defeat the bad guys, a half year to rebuild everything, and all's well that ends well. *None* of that is Katsuki's problem.

Aizawa's figure, shrinking as Katsuki runs, pops into his mind's eye. Katsuki sweeps that shit out of there before it gets to settle.

It's not his damned problem.

With the radio off, rather than his grated nerves calming down, he notices every sliver of noise, every creak, and rumble. There are no windows in the hallway connected to the study, so no amount of weak twilight glimpses it. It's so quiet things that aren't supposed to become loud, like the screens rattling, or Katsuki's thoughts.

I'm a liar, he thinks, head aching. *When did I become a liar?*

Like the scratched Mighty All Might: The Movie DVDs that would get stuck on one part of the film and never move on, cutscenes from yesterday shuffle on repeat.

Sensei's apology, his pleading expression, his insistence that they made as many mistakes as Katsuki did. His request. Deku, Icy Hot, Round Cheeks, and all the other nerds. Sensei shaking him and pleading him to wake up when he died a little, voice wobbly as Katsuki *mattered*.

He wets his lips. Old Bakugou Katsuki hated lying. Old Bakugou would have never, ever allowed himself to sit back and wait while other people dealt with the danger for him. Never would he have refused an opportunity to be flung at the greatest villain like a grenade and prove that he could make a difference. Especially when he *knew* he could make a difference…

But Katsuki's here, in the private safe haven he inherited by luck, twiddling his thumbs and playing accountant. Largely because old Bakugou Katsuki sucked ass.

"You should sleep, Kacchan." He heard Eri's steps crossing the hall, hyperaware as he is, but he only looks at her now she's at the door frame. She's groggy and sleep-tousled, clad in her pajamas. Satsu curls at her side, unhappy at having his nap time disrupted. The furry shit's the only one in this house who isn't trying (and failing) to pretend they don't care about the world ending some couple dozen miles away. He has changed species from cat to leech overnight though. At first, he clung to Katsuki after Katsuki came home and Eri healed him, but not allowing your nosy cat into the bathroom with you apparently angers said cat because he abandoned Katsuki and went to bed with the kid instead.

"I have work to do," he says.

"More grown-up work you can't tell me about?" Her tone, subtle as it is, startles him. She's been odd since he came home but he figured the stress of the day caused it. Plus, their interactions earlier lasted less than twenty minutes, because straining what was left of her rewind reserves to reverse muscular's damage left her exhausted.

"Kind of."

"Though so." Oh, no. He's definitely not imagining that tone.

"I'm making sure we're safe brat, and that we won't starve. Boring grown-up stuff."

"Right."

"I gotta deal with the other portals too. Can't have people stumbling on them. I gotta be up early." That he hasn't slept at all is but an irrelevant detail.

Eri stiffens like she's remembered something she'd rather forget and lowers her gaze. "Kacchan…" she says, voice high even for her.

"What?" Katsuki urges. The brat shakes her head.

"It's—I'm… scared."

His raised eyebrows make her double down on this claim of fear, and her aura fluctuates irregularly. Is Katsuki looking too deep into this?

“Nothing can get us on here, kid. C’mere.” Reluctant, she walks closer and sits by him; Satsu settles between them, aura bright and fluffy. “Once I close the rest of the portals, no one will know this place exists. We’re safe.”

“… I hope so, Kacchan.” She’s not looking at him and Katsuki doesn’t like that, so he starts telling her favorite made-up hero story. It loosens her up and soon she's complaining that stories are for *babies*, not big kids like her.

“You say this shit after you’ve heard three? Had your fill and you’re acting cool now?” He’s going to flick at her forehead when Satsu stands all of a sudden, turning towards the empty hallway like something’s there.

Then, there’s a thud and a clang that has every worst scenario playing in Katsuki’s head. He shares a glance with Eri before standing up. Either the living room’s catch-all cubbies they shove all their junk into have finally said enough’s enough and vomited the junk back out, or someone’s in the living room.

Motioning for Eri to stay where she is, Katsuki grabs the hefty, half-meter-long metal sheath of one of healer hag’s old recipe scrolls to use as a bat and tiptoes, as quiet as he can, towards the hallway.

After taking a deep breath in, he peeks over the door frame, and what he sees is almost worst than a villain.

Two familiar bodies slumped in a heap, having erupted from the cubby housing healer hag’s magic purse. The ends of their legs linger on the other side of the pocket portal they crawled here through, and their gym uniforms are matted with blood and dust and other unpleasant things.

Why the fuck are Deku and Icyhot in *his* living room? Why are they laying in a bloody charred heap on *his* tatami? For a moment, the terrifying thought that they’re dead and he’s been sent their corpses as some sort of divine karma petrifies him, but the spell is broken by Icyhot’s pained croak of a groan.

Deku, wrecked from front to back, struggles to raise his head and make blurry eye contact with Katsuki long enough to gasp out, “Shouto… said you could… help,” before passing out.

Fuck his life.

+ + +

The day prior

Eri wakes in an unfamiliar room, nothing more than a box with plain white walls scented boring stale vanilla, two blacked-out windows, and unassuming dark wood furniture. Opposite her hospital bed, not unlike the one granny used to have, is a tv set with a low, uncomfortable-looking sofa under it. A couple posters of illustrated health tips, like the correct way to brush your teeth and 'how do I know what is causing my child's fever' have been halfheartedly stuck to the walls alongside some peeling flower and heart stickers.

She hates it from the get-go, if only because the futile attempts at disguising its status as an infirmary remind her of her old room at the Hassaikai. The security camera attached to the leftmost corner of the ceiling and pointing right at her bed certainly doesn't help.

Memories of what happened come to her in a rush, her chest growing heavy. Kacchan fell because those three did something to him with that gas and, like Kacchan had warned, once they'd been caught the unwashed teacher refused to let them go. Frustrated, she runs her hands through her hair and notes that one, her horn's grown bigger from the stress, and two, her Deku hood is gone. It's been left neatly on the nightstand alongside granny's magic purse and her (now empty) bottle of pepper spray.

Something must have happened between Kacchan and those three before he started living with granny, she contemplates. His reluctance to come to UA in the first place didn't go unnoticed; it was only her begging that lead him to agree. He'd had a reason for not wanting to be here he'd ignored *for her*. And now he's been taken away, *because of her*.

Fat tears well up in her eyes, and she scrubs at her face furiously to get the incoming sobs to stop.

Shit. Eri can't be bawling like a little baby when Kacchan might be in danger. Wasn't it in a room like this one, adorned in a silly amount of terrible drawings Eri used to be proud of, that she'd made granny a promise?

He's sick, differently from me. His heart is sick…You're too small for me to burden you with this… but look out for him.

She'd taken granny's thin and wrinkled finger and given her word.

Granny had trusted her, only her, to hold to it.

Although her legs are still wobbly and her balance off kilter, she gets off the bed, grabs her belongings, and tries the most obvious way out, the door. It's locked as are the windows. Worth a try.

Returning to the bed, she makes a mental note of all her supplies. Granny's purse appears untouched, which is dumb of whoever locked her here, as it gives her access to pretty much every tool she could ever need, including the pocket portal to take her home. They've underestimated her because she's a kid, the stupidheads.

Skipping the door will be as easy as sliding half of the portal through the crack. With the rest of it inside, she can hop through home from this side and leave out the other to whatever hallways lie beyond. Then she'll sneak around until she finds Kacchan, sleep smoke anyone in her way. It'll be like old times, like mapping her way through Chisaki's maze. Her hands tremble and her crying, though now inaudible, hasn't stopped. That's right. This is nothing. UA staff can't be worse than Chisaki's helpers, whatever punishment she gets if she is caught can't be worse than being strapped to that chair and dismantled. It won't ever come to that. By the time the unwashed teachers figure out they're gone, Katsuki and Eri will already be home.

It's a good plan, just one that never makes it out of the drawing board.

Keys rustle on the other end of the door. Eri freezes, preparations forgotten. The impossible dread that she's ended up back *there* and it's not UA staff but Chisaki behind this paralyzes her. She fights the urge to crumple up small and hide herself in the bed's thin sheets; the handle slumps down; two voices ("… calm… have to check on… can't stay." "…worry, Sensei.") converse, familiar in a way she can't place.

Shouto, the fire and ice hero, sensei's little brother steps inside. He says a few things to whoever he was with that Eri doesn't register from the shock, then he closes the door again.

Why, of all people, is Fuyumi sensei's littlest brother here? What's he got to do this? He can't— there's no way he's one of the bad guys, is there?

"I have tissues," he offers after sitting down on the hard couch as if he carries tissues just in case he might run into a situation like this one.

Eri sniffles, wipes her tears herself out of spite, and makes a blind, speedy run for the unlocked door. The handle is cold enough to burn

her hand and refuses to budge because her poor attempts at a hasty getaway are nothing for a pro hero's reflexes. Shouto iced the handle before she was halfway there.

"You're supposed to stay in here."

"Let me and Kacchan go—" Shouto picks her up from her sides like a toddler and heaves her back on the bed, treating her thrashing like a minor inconvenience.

"Sorry, can't do that."

It's hopeless. Eri knows all about how strong Shouto is, she's watched all his recorded battles. The sleep bombs are made for regular people, not trained heroes, and Eri can't stab him, because he's sensei's brother.

The fact that he's sensei's brother has her traitorously relaxing if only a little.

"Why not?!" she hiccups, embarrassed by how desperate she sounds.

"Bakugou's not well enough to see you yet." Again with this Bakugou. "Use a tissue. I promise they're the nice ones, peppermint scented."

She grabs one angrily. Fuyumi-sensei buys the same ones. "I don't *care* about *Bakugou*."

"You don't?"

"I want to see *Kacchan*. Blond, pink eyes, swears a lot, pretends he's not as much an All Might fanboy as I'm a Deku one— *Kacchan*!"

Shouto hums in cryptic understanding.

"What are you humming for?" she demands and thinks about how this Bakugou might relate to Kacchan. Kacchan's long name is Katsuki. Eri's been able to say the 'tsu' right for months now, but she sticks to Kacchan because it feels special.

Shouto's lips form a line, and he appears to be debating something in his head. "…Bakugou Katsuki, that's 'Kacchan's' full name. Kacchan is Midoriya's nickname for him. I guess you didn't know. "

Eri didn't know. How does Sensei's brother know? Midoriya Izuku… that's *Deku's* real name! How is he related to this?

“I don’t believe you.”

Shouto shrugs. He may be sensei’s relative, but Fuyumi’s way better than him. This is like talking to a wall of brick.

“How would *you* even know?”

“We were in the same class.” Kacchan would have mentioned that. Eri scoffs.

“When, elementary school?”

Shouto shakes his head. “High school.”

Okay, that’s— “*Kacchan went to UA?!"*

“Yes?” Expression neutral, he says it simply, as if he’s telling her the sky is blue and not a statement so unimaginable it has her leaning over the bed’s railing. If Kacchan was in the same class as Shouto, he was also in the same class as Uravity, Red Riot, Creati, Ingenium… as Deku. And, knowing full well how obsessed Eri is with the students of UA’s so-called golden grade, he’s *never* mentioned this?

“Liar.”

“You’re very skeptical for a little kid.”

She can’t wrap her head around why anyone who managed to be accepted into the coolest most difficultest high school in the whole country would ever leave. It’s impossible. “He’s in university and he takes care of the store. He doesn’t go here.” Unless he’s been lying to her and going to UA all along, which makes no sense.

“But he used to.”

“No one *quits* UA.”

Shouto looks down, his finger tugging at a loose thread in the couch’s upholstery. “He didn’t quit… It’s complicated.”

Eri considers that. Deku almost saved her from Chisaki when he was nearing the end of his first year. By that time, Kacchan had been with granny for a while. That means he couldn’t have been at UA for longer than two or three months, a weird time to cut your studies short.

Bad people…hurt his heart.

“It’s because of the bad people, isn’t it? Because they hurt him.” They must be why he can’t come back. For the first time, Eri considers how little she knows about Kacchan’s life before granny. She’d never asked how he’d ended up there, what happened to the explosion quirk he’d reference sometimes, or who the *bad people* are. Eri’s never known her real surname, so she never thought about Kacchan’s. Kacchan took her in when she was six and terrified, and he became a fixture in her life so solid it was difficult to imagine he’d spent fifteen years prior someplace else, doing something else. This someplace else is apparently *UA*, and she doesn’t understand why he would hide it from her. Yeah, sometimes, when they watched UA-related shows he’d say things that were strangely specific, but when she talked about Deku, for example, he showed little signs of ever having known him.

A tiny spark of betrayal tingles her fingers.

She’s missing a piece of this puzzle. UA and the bad people can’t be one and the same. Kacchan must hate UA for another reason. One she doesn’t know yet. He wouldn’t lie to her without a good reason.

“Aren’t you Kacchan’s friends?” she asks. Classmates are supposed to be friends. That’s what Fuyumi-sensei says.

“That’s also complicated.”

“No, you don’t wanna tell me you aren’t. If you were, Kacchan wouldn’t be scared of coming here.”

“He’s scared?”

“He doesn’t like UA.”

“…We weren’t friends when he did attend and I haven’t talked to him since, I wouldn’t know what he thinks of UA.”

“Why weren’t you friends?”

“Because—” Shouto pauses, his brows wrinkling like he doesn’t know. “Because I barely cared about anyone, back then, and Bakugou hated me, I think. We had a… rivalry.” He doesn’t sound very sure of it. Eri recalls how they’d both rooted against him when they watched the Sports Festival last year. Kacchan’s colorful nicknames that were a little too specific to be aimed at a total stranger.

“He calls you half-assed bastard.”

“That was because I forfeited our match in first year. He might’ve won anyway but I guess *might* never was good enough for him,” he says wistfully.

“Won what?”

“Our first year Sports Festival.”

Her grip on the endboard of the bed she’s been leaning over slips and she has to right herself. “Kacchan competed in *the Sports Festival?* Kacchan *won* the Sports Festival?!” This is too much.

Shouto frowns. “Yes. Bakugou seemed like a brute, but he was a very good student and a skilled fighter… How long have you been living with him?”

“Two years,” she mumbles.

“And you don’t know any of this?”

“No,” she admits.

The conversation lulls. Shouto’s not so bad, regardless of the Fuyumi-sensei bias clouding her judgment. His scar is more prominent but he’s also prettier in real life; his voice is gentle and she’s always been a fan of his work. Sometimes, when she’d behaved, Chisaki would pick keepers for her who weren’t villains, who were sweet and kind and treated her nicely. They never lasted long, because one way or another Eri always convinced them to let her escape, and Chisaki didn’t like that.

If she plays her cards right…

“The bad people who hurt Kacchan the first time, who were they?”

“The League. All for One and Shigaraki and my—” He stops. Eri etches those names into her memory, right beside her promise to granny.

“Will you take me to him?”

“He’s asleep, getting medical care.”

“Because those teachers made him faint.”

“It was an accident. They wouldn’t hurt Bakugou on purpose. You’re safe here.”

Here goes. “Eraserhead is your homeroom teacher. He must have been Kacchan’s too. And the rest of them, they also taught him, didn’t they? Shouldn’t they know what that smoke does to Kacchan? And they didn’t keep him safe from the bad guys who hurt his heart. If they’d been nice to him, he wouldn’t hate UA so much. But he does, which means they weren’t nice. Why would you start being nice now?”

Shouto didn’t expect that. “You don’t know the full story. Our teachers did mess up, but he wasn’t the best person back then.”

“So what? Dorimo used to throw a tantrum every break in first grade, but Fuyumi-sensei never gave up on him. She says it’s her job as a teacher to make us better people. They’re supposed to help you and teach you how to be good because they’re teachers and that’s what teachers do. And they never ever leave you to be hurt by the bad guys. Whenever we have safety drills, she always leaves last. Kacchan said she was so worried that time I was almost ‘napped she followed us even though it was dangerous and that’s why she’s allowed to give me tasty food to bring home now. Said she ‘threatened the chicken’ for me and helped Kacchan fake kill that purple guy. If sensei can do all that and she’s not even a hero, the heroes should have helped Kacchan ten times over.”

Shouto’s mouth hangs half open. The petty part of her loves his stupefied face. Take that, you’re not the only one who’s got secrets up their sleevies.

“Nee-san—”

“Would have taken me to Kacchan and let us both go.”

“She *threatened* a chicken? Fake kill *what* purple guy—?!” His voice cracks.

“Gimme your phone and I’ll call her. I know her number. She’ll tell you you’re being stupid.”

“What?”

“Or you could take me to Kacchan on your own instead of holding me ransom.”

“I’m not ransoming you. Ransoming means releasing someone in exchange for money—”

“Well, I can’t leave, can I?”

“Yes but I’m not asking you for money.”

“So *I can’t* leave. You’ve kidnapped me.”

“Yes, I mean, *no*.”

“Why can’t I leave?”

“Because—”

“See. You don’t even know. Admit it, you’re keeping me in here to—to bully Kacchan into doing what you want!

“We are?” Shouto shakes his head. ”No we aren’t—“

“So why? What are your orders?”

“Watch you, make sure you’re safe and no one bothers you. Keep you in here.”

“If staying safe means keeping me in here that means out there isn’t safe. But out there— the only thing out there is UA, which means UA isn’t safe.” She’s confusing herself at this point but Shouto’s buying it too so it’s worth it.

“Sensei only wants to talk to him.”

“And I’m telling you, Kacchan doesn’t.”

“He’s asleep anyway.”

“But I can’t even see him sleeping.”

“Because he’s not in good condition. Sensei said Midnight’s gas almost killed him and seeing him unstable like that may traumatize you.” As if. She’s already seen Kacchan dead. Almost dead is nothing. A bad taste builds in her mouth anyway — the idea that Kacchan could die again because of her sickening.

“You killed him and you expect me to believe this place is safe?!” Chisaki’s screams resonating in the dark, the crying and pleading, the spikes and blood under the dim glow of the nightlight. Snapshots of her life she’s been trying two years to suppress grow through the cracks like weeds. These people don’t know what her and Kacchan have been through. What Kacchan’s been through. Eri knows she hates being locked anywhere with no option to leave, and she knows Kacchan’s bound to be the same. They don’t have a right to keep her

here.

“He’s not dead.”

“Does it matter? We don’t wanna talk. He— he hates UA. We’re only here because of me, because I begged. It’s my fault if he dies again!”

“Again?” “

She ignores him. “You take me to him and we’re going home.”

“But you can’t go anywhere. He needs medical attention.” Shouto repeats everything slowly, like he’s speaking to a kindergartner. Eri is *eight* and graduates from Minami Early next year. She’s *not* little.

“We have medical attention at home.” A whole shop and attic’s worth. Worst case scenario, Eri could phone up Aoi. She doesn’t much like Aoi but the hauls of Hiryo healing stuff she smuggles them on her visits are good enough reason to tolerate her. And they’re more than enough to fix Kacchan up, no? Or, she could just rewind him. Easy as that.

“We don’t know where home is, and with Bakugou incapacitated, he can’t take you. Or do you expect to carry him all the way to wherever you live yourself?”

“Eh? Carrying’s for losers. All I gotta do is...”

“What?” He looks genuinely curious.

Eri halts. What if she isn’t supposed to let that slip? Already she’s broken so many of Kacchan’s rules; avoid the teachers and students was one of the top ones and she can’t stop talking to Sensei’s brother. Shouto could take the portal away and— and give it to Eraserhead to destroy it — oh, god, there are rumors Principal Nezu brews the remains of his enemies into tea! No… no, that’s too much. Maybe Shouto will listen. Maybe he’ll realize Eri’s got a concrete way to go home and, and help her! Right. She’ll convince him to help her. “With the pocket portals,” she says finally and leans towards granny’s bag. It takes a bit of digging (Shouto’s face twitches when her whole arm disappears inside the tiny purse) but soon she’s got it, folded all neatly. She doesn’t unfold it, holds it up as is.

“This,” she says, “is a magic portal. All I gotta do is carry Kacchan through here and it’ll take us right home. It’s a warping quirk.”

Understanding seems to sweep through Shouto. “Your purse works like that too.”

“Yes. It’s that easy… Can I see Kacchan now?”

“No.”

“I hate you.”

“I don’t think anything I’ve said or done thus far warrants you hating me.” God, he’s dense. “The truth is, I doubt Sensei will let Bakugou go without speaking to him first.”

He’s admitted it, that Kacchan and her are being kept here by force. “I told you, he doesn’t *wanna* talk—”

“He’s been missing for more than two years. You don’t get to walk away from that.”

“Kacchan’s eighteen. He’s old enough.”

“Well, he didn’t exactly disappear under normal circumstances. He wasn’t a run-away — he was taken.” Eri shivers. “Sensei said this talk is really important.”

“For Kacchan or for him?”

That one Shouto doesn’t wanna answer. “Kid. I don’t like it much either. From what Midoriya’s told me before, I believe what you’re saying now, about him not wanting to be here. If the two of you have been fine together all this time I’m assuming he chose not to come back. When Midoriya said we could search for him back then, I said no. I thought he wouldn’t want us interfering like that. I still think so.”

“Then you’re on my side.”

“I am. I *owe* Bakugou.” He stresses this. “But I’m also on Sensei’s side… He never stopped looking, all this time. So I can’t help you. I’m sorry.”

“You really are half-assed.”

Shouto frowns. “My entire ass is intact, actually. For now, put your portal away and try to calm down. He’ll wake up soon, they’ll talk and you’ll get to leave. Sensei won’t keep him if he doesn’t want to stay, that much I can promise.”

Eri considers her options. She's got no hope of defeating Shouto short of rewinding him to a useless baby. Not taking him into account, she's still at UA, full of UA-trained people outside. A couple sleep smokes and a taser ain't gonna be enough to take all of them down. She'd got no idea where Kacchan is being kept either. It's a hopeless situation.

So, begrudging, she sits and waits.

+ + +

Shouto lies to Eraserhead when he comes to check on them; doesn't give any indication they've been talking at all. That earns him some brownie points, but only a few.

Minutes drip at an agonizing pace — slower than the leaky faucet in the front yard Kacchan keeps forgetting to repair— drop by drop they fill up hours. When they get confirmation Kacchan is up and this infamous talk is about to start, the sky outside has long darkened. Eri's gone through five stages of frustration, and she's stuck between the fourth and fifth, pulling your hair out impatiently and acceptance. With the first sparks of conversation gone Shouto wasn't much of a talker, and Eri wanted to avoid giving away any more of her and Kacchan's secrets, so she filled time by asking random questions about Shouto the hero.

Suzu and she argue a lot over whether Shouto's airheadedness is a persona, and now she's got an answer — it's not.

("Is it true that you wanted to name yourself thermostat?"

"No. I've got no clue who started that rumor.")

("I read that you only like cold soba."

"That's not true. I also accept hot soba on occasion.")

("Uravity said in an interview you only eat cold things because you risk burning down the kitchen when something's gotta be heated up."

"That was one time. I didn't know you weren't supposed to put eggs in the microwave. Or that the wine would catch on fire and explode when I poured it in the pan.")

He tries to pry information out of her in return, but he only reads her sarcasm half of the time. ("You have a tiger whore for a pet?") Though she enjoys asking about his fighting techniques and the rescue

missions he's grown famous for, Eri is restless, hung up on Kacchan. Her only hope are Shouto's promises, his easy, confident affirmations that Eraserhead will let them both go once Kacchan inevitably declines whatever Eraserhead wants to offer him.

Those promises never get to see the light of day. It begins with the blackout. Then, an alarm rings, loud as hell. Siren red lights shroud the room in warning. A voice over the loudspeaker announces numbers and words that make Shouto stiffen.

"You have to go," he says, standing up with an urgency Eri hadn't thought him capable of.

"What's going on—" She watches as he shoves her Deku hood and gloves into granny's bag before leaving it in her lap.

"It's an attack from the League." The League. The League who hurt Kacchan.

"Kacchan's in danger—"

"No," Shouto says, stopping her from scrambling off the bed. The wail of the sirens is making her heart race in the bad way. She hates it. They're here because of her. All of this is because of her.

"Let me go—!"

"No. You're going *home*," Shouto orders. She's stopped flailing, but she's started to tremble. "I don't know how bad it's going to be and I have to be out there. You, *need* to go home."

"But Kacchan— they're the people who hurt him!"

"Yes, and they're still dangerous. He'll be better off knowing you're safe. Go home. *Right now*." He sounds like he'll throw her through the portal himself. Something's happened between him and the League too, Eri gathers. Otherwise, he wouldn't be so stressed this abruptly.

Kacchan did tell her to go back home at any sign of danger and wait for him. He'd come back he said, always.

He'd promised it. Kacchan always keeps his promises.

+ + +

Eri goes home, to Satsu and her hero plushies and the tablecloth she and Kacchan forgot to take away after breakfast still laid out. Only the

string lights they always keep on illuminate a couple of the house's cozy rooms, and she sees the other end of the portal be zipped up and crumpled. Satsu circles around her, purring and questioning with his face, "Where's Katsuki?"

"I know boy," Eri says, bending down to pat him and ruffle his fur. He doesn't even object to being hugged—seems to be able to tell that Eri's heart is beating a little too fast, her breaths are coming a little too short. She exhales and steels herself.

Unicorn was taken by the UA people, so to destroy the portal she needs something else. All three pairs of scissors they've got are far too blunt and worn to cut through the sturdy reinforced fabric. As she struggles to make even a little nick in the gate, her eyes catch on the lighter next to the candles on the kitchen counter. Flustered and woozy, she snatches it, flicks it on without thinking, and holds it under the portal. It catches flame, too fast and too big, and heats up enough that her grip flinches and lets it fall. On the wooden floor.

"Shit, shit, *shit*," she chants, rushing to fill water from the sink and use it to put the fire out before she burns their house down. That must be one of Kacchan's special lighters, the ones that get so hot on ignition his blood will explode extra big. Greenish flames lick at the wood, charring it. Pouring water on it only causes a scorching hot burst of evaporation. "Fuck. Please, no. Go out, go out, go out—" She's about to dump another futile jug of water at the possible disaster when electricity dries the air and the room's temperature plummets. Grey clouds, poofy and dark, float over the kitchen and shower everything, from her to the fire, in a violent downpour. Eri collapses onto the wet floor when the clouds dissipate, soaked and breathing hard.

Satsu purrs at her in disappointment, but he still trots over and lays next to her, warm gusts of wind blowing around him to dry the kitchen faster. The wind inflates her dress and makes her hair dance. Eri crawls to where the portal is laid in a heap, drenched but no longer on fire. She smooths it out and sees that the connection to the other side, though warbled, is still active. "Fuck."

There's one of her butterfly knives from her room…or burying it…

Or she could leave it. Kacchan won't be long, surely. They'll destroy it together once he's home. And if he doesn't get home, then, then she has a way to get back to UA and insist they let him go! Right. She'll keep it a little longer, just in case.

Eri folds the portal and puts it far inside the magic purse. After she and Satsu have sufficiently cleaned up the kitchen, she slumps into the mass of cushions and fluffy pillows they use in place of a living room couch. Satsu settles beside her. It's late spring, should be too hot for blankets, but Eri finds herself using one anyway. She's cold. The remote is buried under the pillows. It's ten forty-two. She flips the TV on and is met with chaotic news reports, frantic calls to safety, announcements of national emergency.

Somewhere between ten forty-two and midnight, she loses herself, conjuring the vilest explanations for why Kacchan isn't home yet. The air of the living room's gone stuffy and the TV died, its signal succumbing to static, a while ago, so she struggles to slide open the heavy storm shutters and decides to sit outside — stare at the stars starting to cloud over. She thinks of the day passed, of Kacchan's connection to UA and Shouto and Deku. *Kacchan's Midoriya's nickname,* Shouto said. What does that mean? Why hasn't Kacchan been honest with her?

I'm allergic to heroes, I'll explain when you're older.

Is she not old enough yet? She doesn't understand.

Eri forgets all about the portal and Kacchan coming home like he does only makes her forget further.

+ + +

"I told you to destroy the portal!" Katsuki grits out, facing Eri, (who rather than listening when he said to stay put, has sprinted behind him) to avoid looking at the mound of unwanted people staining his floor. They're hurt. Aizawa's in his head again, his eyes asking Katsuki to stay. If he had, would these two… "Why the fuck do they—?"

"I'm *sorry*," the brat manages, her eyes wide. "Our s-scissors were blunt and they took unicorn off me and the shredder wasn't working and— and I tried to burn it, I tried, but I lit the kitchen on fire by accident instead and Satsu had to put out the fire with a cloud and it was too dark and scary to bury it in the forest, so— so I thought it would be okay to put it in granny's purse until you came home and you could get rid of it—"

"So why didn't you tell me?!"

"Because— because you took so long and came back all bloody and dead and you were so tired and you made me promise to close the

portal and I didn't and— and— Kacchan, they're *hurt*."

He knows. He fucking knows.

So much for none of this being his problem.

+ + +

"Why am I in a swimmin' pool?" Izuku's slurring, his head limp against the tile of the tub.

"It's a bathtub, Deku." Katsuki tugs at the nerd's arm, straightening it again. Izuku winces.

"That feels funny."

Maybe drugging him was a bad idea. It's only his body weight's dose of extra-strength acetaminophen, but Deku must not be used to being on pain meds, because he's giggling worse than Katsuki on LSD. He rationalizes it a necessary evil— Izuku's got a fever from infection, his arms are too torn up to fix lucid and the last thing he needs is One for All going haywire in his bathroom. The dense mass of the aura is overwhelming enough by itself.

These nerds are in *really* bad shape. That's why Katsuki's got both of them crammed into a bubble bath of quirked water (he's emptied every complementary healing remedy and type of magic blood in the house into this water. All of it's about three-quarters as potent as the Ambrosia Koharu used on Katsuki way back, but that Ambrosia's long finished) Between Deku's deflated One for All mess, Halfie's half-half aura that's tangible enough Katsuki can feel both its chill and warmth and the two dozen quirks in the water blending into a filmy brown, it's hard to be in here without feeling suffocated. Icyhot is half asleep on the other side of the tub, submerged up to his chin, a soothed-out expression on his face. Yeah, Katsuki bets that quirked water feels nice on the atrocious amount of burns he's got *everywhere*. Couldn't even be embarrassed about having to undress the two dumbfucks, they were so beat up his mind went into healing mode overdrive.

"Kacchan's good at this," Deku says as Katsuki finishes another line of stitches. By the end of this, he'll have ten on each arm—damned nerd.

"Stop curling your arm, *idiot*." Izuku smiles, his cheek squishing against the tile. His curls are matted in mud and blood and dust and his stupid freckled face is loopy. The bathroom's turned into a sauna— he needs the temperature warm enough that they won't catch colds

until they've done their share of time in the water. Sweat beads on his forehead and back, the humidity soaking his pajamas.

"Kacchan's so nice." Another line down. Katsuki cleans off any stray gunk before guiding the left arm back into the water, causing the nerd to hiss. He's done a brachial plexus blocker on both his arms to numb them, but he went with a smaller dose for safety's sake, so Deku can still move his arms around slowly and feel some things.

"Other arm," he says. "Two more lines and we're done."

Clumsily, Deku pulls his right out of the water. It's Deku's dominant, and already scarred to hell and back. Today, Katsuki's stitched together eight new soon-to-be scars, and now it's time for the final two, particularly deep wounds that needed a little healing time in the water before getting sewn shut.

Izuku hums, adjusting his head and observing Katsuki with droopy eyes. His lip is split and there's a cut on his forehead. His eyelids look like they're dying to close, and Katsuki can't have that.

"You're a fucking kite. You never had painkillers before?" Deku blinks, his murky gaze clearing a little.

"Not allowed. Get hurt so much I'd get addicted."

"Not even after surgeries?"

"Used to have one a month in first year. Too many. Too often to have opioids."

Katsuki frowns.

"S'okay. Better now. Last surgery was… end of second year, appendicitis. Something always hurts so… high tolerance."

Opposite problem from Katsuki, who feels so little he doesn't know what's supposed to hurt anymore.

Five minutes slip by. Katsuki's much better at doing this to other people than he is at doing it to himself while half dead. "Are we done yet?"

"Now we are, yeah."

"Bath done?"

“Five more minutes— keep your arm under the water, dumbass.”

“M’kay, Kacchan.”

Katsuki gathers his supplies, sets them aside for disinfection, and turns his sights on Todoroki.

“Oi, halfie,” he says, pushing at the guy’s submerged shoulder gently. “You’re done. Get out so I can wrap your burns.” Icyhot’s stare is hazy, but he’s listening. He opens his mouth to say something — only a croak comes out, trying to make sound obviously painful for him.

“Your vocal cords are fried, halfie. It’s gonna be at least a day ‘till you can talk again.”

Todoroki’s chapped lips press together. There’s a string of subtle changes in his expression like he’s trying to convey something to Katsuki. His eyes move over Katsuki’s clothes, and he shakes his head.

“What? Are you worried cuz you don’t have clothes? I’m not gonna stuff you back in your torn-up suit.” Katsuki sits on the bathroom ledge and pours a dollop of shampoo on Icy Hot’s dusty hair. “Here’s what we’re gonna do. I’m gonna clean your candy cane hair squeaky and then you’re gonna get out and dry off, carefully, put on the clothes on the shelves by the sink, just the bottoms, I still need to wrap your burns. When you get out of the water it’ll sting like a bitch, but that means it’s working. Got that?”

Icyhot offers a tiny nod and that’s enough for Katsuki. He’s quick with the bandaging because he wants Todoroki out of the humidity as fast as possible. When he gets to his bruised neck, he lingers, being extra gentle. The type of burn is familiar.

“Your shitty brother do this?”

Todoroki doesn’t— *can’t* say anything, but Katsuki knows he’s right.

“Dabi tried to burn him alive,” Deku fills in helpfully.

“Told the guy he was insane back then. Wouldn’t hear it cuz I was high and scum trash like Endeavor or whatever.”

Icy hot shakes his head, face twitching in a dozen expressions again.

“I don’t speak face, halfie. Go wrap yourself with a blanket in the living room and find some paper to write on.”

Needing to be helped into one of Katsuki's shirts, oversized because the dumbass has the audacity to be bigger built and taller (by two centimeters!) than Katsuki, is not Todoroki's favorite thing in the world, but he grits his teeth through the bandages shifting against the most sensitive of the burns and turns to Katsuki.

Mouths *thank you* — because his ears have been getting worse for months now Katsuki's lip reading is somewhat decent by necessity. Then, he stands there looking awkward.

"Are you gonna sit your ass in the living room or do I gotta carry you over there?"

Icyhot mouths an apology. "Sorry? Sorry for what? '*My… mother*' Your hag's the only one of you idiots I've never seen face to face you know. And your irrelevant brother. They're the last ones you should be apologizing to me for. At least they stay out of my business…what? Not your mom?" He watches Todoroki mouth the word again carefully. "'*Brother… Tou… ya*'. Oh, you mean Crusty." Katsuki nudges him towards the living room, making sure not to touch where there are bandages, which is more difficult than you'd think. "Fuck off with that shit."

He goes back to Deku, who he has to stop from slipping under the tub's water level and drowning. At least it got things started on the hair. He uses Eri's shampoo for Deku, since her hair is vaguely curly, and scrubs hard, like he remembers his mom scrubbing those few times she'd volunteered to help wash and cut his hair as a little kid.

"That letter you gave me for Shouto— back then," Deku mumbles. "You wrote about his brother."

"Took you a long ass time to figure out."

"He never told us. Just the rest of his family, I think… I could tell he was off those first few weeks after we got your letters. Kirishima wanted to tell a teacher or look for you, but Shouto was on my side and agreed to keep things between us. I guess he was scared of having to hand his letter over to the police. You didn't even write about Dabi's real identity in the life details and weaknesses part of the report… Anyway, after a while, the League started laying low again, and Dabi did too, so I guess Shouto kind of forgot. Or he had his own plans with his family. I dunno… I think Dabi was hoping for the surprise factor today, though, since he told us face to face and all… Since—"

“Do you ever shut up?” Katsuki bumps Izuku’s face into the water, making him sputter. He uses his fingers to comb out a particularly stubborn knot of dried mud.

“I really want to know, though. How’d you find out?”

“Same way I did One for All. Put my brain to work.” Deku relaxes and *mhms* like he’s waiting for further information, and Katsuki humors him. “Crusty came and gave me a sandwich or a bun or I don’t know what it was. At this point, I’d been in there for a while, lost my bearings real good. I think doc gave me nitrous oxide or ecstasy that time, dunno which, but I was high as hell. He said they’d be kidnapping one of you.”

“The summer camp.” Izuku’s piecing together the timeline of this.

“Said Icyhot’s name like me talking about you in fifth grade. It was easy enough to read from there. Asshole started venting like I gave a shit. Figured I’d never get out of there alive.” He didn’t, but that’s beside the point.

“*M’* happy you’re alive.” Katsuki rinses off the suds with the detachable shower head.

“You’re a nerd.”

“I was worried, Kacchan… You said you’d found a safe place to stay but I was at the Hassaikai, I read your message on the wall... Sat in on the briefing afterward too and watched the footage they had, heard you crying, it was bad. Wanted to find you I was so frustrated and the — the idiot from the commission was saying all sorts of stupid things, even Sensei got mad… I ended up telling him about One for All when he… said sorry for not listening to me when I told them not to expel you. It was so unfair how you got the short end of the stick. It was driving me crazy… I’ve been talking to Tsukauchi-san from the beginning, keeping the investigation going, and checking up on any progress. I knew the commission had people looking for you too, people that must’ve known more than the police, but no one would tell me. When mom said she’d talked to you, yesterday, I freaked out… Saw it as my chance, I guess.” All of this has been said in the form of a long continuous stream of mumbles. Katsuki’s finished with the hair, dried, and dressed him in this time. “Point is, m’ sorry for stressing you out, at UA. You don’t owe me anything anymore…. Please don’t talk about yourself like that again. M’ so… glad you’re okay… and… and that Shouto brought us… to your magic house…”

He slumps against the arm Katsuki's using to steady him hard, the unexpected weight making Katsuki hmmph.

The nerd's sound asleep.

+ + +

"Why didn't you tell me you went to UA?"

Deku lays on a futon, fast asleep, Todoroki fiddles with his IV serum drip (his throat's too sensitive yet for proper food) at the table, and Katsuki and Eri sit on the other side of the living room. Katsuki's cleaning his supplies and organizing them back into his pocket med-kit.

"Did halfie tell you fairytales? Is this why you've been acting like I replaced the apples in the fridge with celery?"

Her face says enough.

"I never *hid* it. You just don't listen when Blue and Memory Machine come over."

Eri doesn't like that answer and Katsuki doesn't like this discussion. "You… Kacchan you won the Sports Festival!"

He wipes his scalpel for the third time with a ball of cotton soaked in alcohol. "Yeah, because this dumbass didn't take me seriously." Halfie's ugly mug reads *don't blame me*. "Yeah, you. Wasn't it you who was keeping my kid? Did you tell her this bullshit?"

"He told me the truth…Why didn't you ever show me your fights? How come I've never run into them? I've watched so many UA fights!"

Katsuki doesn't wanna tell her he's blocked his name from their search engine at home, and asked Fuyumi to do the same at school.

"Dunno." He cuts off the unraveled bits of suturing string and puts the rest back in its place. All of these will need some time under UV lights for proper sterilizing. "S'not much to brag about anyway." No, he *doesn't* want her to see him flailing like an animal in a cage after the disappointment that was the final match.

"You didn't tell me anything. Your full name, your past, why we had to avoid the staff at UA… When you said bad people were after you too, I thought it was Chisaki, not this League!"

“Chatted real good you two, huh?” Icyhot doesn’t have the decency to at least look a little ashamed.

“Kacchan, I mean it…We’re supposed to protect each other and I don’t even know who I’m protecting you *from*.”

This poor kid seriously thinks the safety bit of their arrangement goes both ways. Katsuki’d sooner die than have her makes sacrifices for him. She’s a kid. Then again, that’s probably why she doesn’t understand that it’s not her job to keep Katsuki safe from everyone, it’s her job to *be kept* safe. When Katsuki was that age, he thought he was perfectly capable of keeping himself safe too. That, like many things about him back then, was delusional as fuck. He doesn’t like babying people, but actual babies have no place on the battlefield. Zero or ten, they’re baby brats all the same. He closes the lid on the med-kit. Any indigence seems to melt from her face when their eyes meet. He hates having to do this with Icyhot as an audience, hates the tender hurt of vulnerability, but he doesn’t wanna leave his kid hanging.

“I didn’t think it mattered. That’s why I didn’t tell you. It was an old part of my life I wanted to leave behind. You don’t know my old surname because I don’t use it anymore, you— candy cane— when you get your voice back you’re gonna call me Katsuki— and I never did much at UA. It was three months, and I got expelled for being an asshole. Then I got kidnapped by the League and a bunch of other things happened that ended up with me becoming an assistant here. You know that thing I can do, where I calm down your quirk?” Eri nods. “I used that power against Overhaul too. I can get rid of quirks if I try hard enough. That’s kind of overpowered, so now both the heroes and villains are after me so they can use me. And I’ve killed some people, so I can’t walk back home scot-free.”

“Oh.” It’s a lot of information for her to take in.

“Yeah, oh. It ain’t a pretty story.”

He’s a fool for ever thinking he could run away from it.

+ + +

When Deku wakes half a day later, groggy and sore but in much better shape than when he arrived, Katsuki knows he’s going to want to talk and beats him to the punch. This is a discussion that’s too much to have in front of Icyhot and the kid, as much character development as Katsuki has gotten. Izuku doesn’t complain as Katsuki leads him

through the well-worn trail to the island's good beach. The weather is holding up (meaning it hasn't started raining quite yet) and angry waves crash with the shore foaming white. Akaryuu, that old man's boat, is a lot more beat up in the daylight, with visible blemishes and stains and dents. But it did its job fine. Katsuki leans by Eri's tree, growing strong as ever, while Deku picks one of the many overturned logs and stumps a little closer to the rest of the forest.

"Look, Izuku" ("Oooh, first name basis." "Shut up Banjo.") he starts," When I said we could talk, I didn't mean you could bring your groupies."

The more Deku rested the more they materialized, and now there are four of them, floating around all translucent. A bald one and a beefy lady and one with white hair and a snaky face and an emo weirdo with a high-necked collar and pin-straight dark hair.

"We're not groupies!" the bald one insists. "Why can you see us, hah?"

"Banjo, cool it. You'll make him freak out again."

"You mean the vestiges, right?"

"Your ghost pals, the floating bastards, whatever shit you call them." He tries to wave vaguely in their direction, which is hard because they're scattered, exploring like a gaggle of children who've never seen a strip of sand. Deku's aura, back to full power, is colorful and big and everywhere, stifling. It looks like All for One's, except under the bubbly, translucent outer layer, the colors are fewer and larger. He's theorized for a while that every color represents a quirk stolen, and if One for All also somehow incorporates the quirks of the people who had it before, it would support that theory. The fact that Deku can fly and shit lightning and puke smoke or whatever pretty much solidifies the theory.

"I can't—" Izuku says, then his face scrunches in concentration.

The ghosts brighten, becoming tangible to a point of semi-opaque and smoking colors at the seams.

"Ninth, is this the 'Kacchan'?" the black-haired one asks.

"You never said your friend would be able to see us, Izuku."

"Because I didn't know, Shimura-san." Izuku's got a curious look in his eyes. "They were bothering you yesterday, weren't they? It's why you

were freaking out so much. You mentioned the groupies then too but I didn't know what you were talking about."

"That one." He motions to Banjo, who's staring at him with a kiddy interest. "Has no idea what personal space means. Tried to poke me."

"In my defense, no one's ever been able to see us before, you don't have an aura, and it felt like I could touch you, if I tried hard enough. I wanted to test the limits. Assumed you couldn't even hear us. The only people we're tangible like that to is people with a mental connection to us. You're fucken weird and weird shit gets poked at."

Katsuki ignores him, arching a brow at Izuku instead. "They're part of your quirk and you can't see them all the time?"

"No. It takes energy on my part to strengthen the mental connection, and they don't come out all the time, or all at once." He gives Katsuki a run-through, these are the previous users of one for all, a bit of their consciousness is stuck inside the quirk and Deku managed to unlock it, which is why he can use their quirks and talk to them. He's number nine so there are eight other nerds in total. Number two and three are emos who didn't wanna come out while one is in love with two so he kept them company. All Might is too ghosty to speak so he's kinda useless and never comes out. It's a lot of information delivered in typical Deku infodump fashion, but Katsuki understands enough of it to name the nerds four and five and six and seven and remember their quirks. Listening is a piece of cake. It's the explanations on his end he's not looking forward to.

"Why did six call me '*the* Kacchan'?" Air quotes encase 'Kacchan'.

"Because ninth is obsessed with—" The bald one dissipates before he can finish the sentence and the rest of them follow. Izuku looks constipated.

Izuku coughs like he's got something in his throat, clears it a couple times. "Never mind that. It's your turn to explain."

He doesn't want to explain shit, but he powers through it anyway. The awkwardness of baring the story of his new life to a guy he both knows and doesn't dissipate within the first few sentences, because Deku's his shitty annoying fucking constant who, other than growing a backbone, hasn't changed in eighteen years and probably won't ever. He's a horrible listener, interrupting constantly and slipping into tangents after every debatable bit of info Katsuki gives away, but he shuts his mouth when it's time to explain Katsuki's bullshit aura

power. He portrays it a fucking blessing. *Oh, I can mess with quirks at the source, sometimes, and this is a recent discover, I can leave my body to do it too, ain't that dandy.*

The fact that it's killing him he'll keep to himself.

"That makes a lot of sense actually. Whenever I tried to explore the mechanics and technicalities of quirks using the old science rules I ended up drawing a blank—"

Katsuki prevents the incoming mutter storm with a grunt.

"Right, yeah, sorry…But, how did you survive the lab, and the Hassaikai?"

"I didn't."

"Eh?"

"…My soul… is kind of detached from my body. It only stays in here because of my quirk energy, which is all inside me in my blood and other body junk. Thing is, when you die, quirk energy doesn't disappear right away. So, until every part of me decomposes my soul will still have an anchor to grip itself to, so I can… use my body when it's dead. And I get reanimated very easily."

+ + +

This has been a very eventful two days for Izuku. Trying to make it through a clone and villain and cloned villain infested UA alive while saving as many people as possible resulted in him and Todoroki chased from the school grounds (once they realized they did more damage than good by being high profile targets next to people the villains considered fodder). As strong as Izuku is, he had just gone plus ultra fighting Uraraka a few hours prior, and the sheer numbers the League had on their side, from Nomus to a million copies of everyone, made it a difficult battle. After a series of unfortunate events, including getting batted out of the sky by Gigantomachia, they ended up stuck in an air pocket after a building under construction collapsed on them. In horrible condition health-wise, in unstable debris that could crush them physically, and way too far from help, their last resort ended up being Todoroki's hastily explained plan of going *through* a piece *of fabric* to *Kacchan's house*, where one could apparently find 'medical attention'.

The whole day felt a pipe nightmare to Izuku but he followed

Todoroki like a kid being lured with hero candy and indeed, the piece of fabric did unzip to form a portal. A watery, messy portal that felt like it might swallow them up but they plunged into anyway.) Indeed they ended up in Kacchan's living room, and indeed they got medical attention. From Kacchan. Who had glasses and white hair and milky eyes and a face scared strange. Who, for some reason, knew how to suture wounds closed and administer regional anesthesia, and washed Izuku's hair with gentle firmness and magic water that felt amazing. Kacchan who was alive and well, who'd gotten taller and sharper and older.

It seemed a parallel universe, and he fell asleep on Kacchan's shoulder convinced it was all a dream.

But then he woke up, not on the battlefield, not in his bed, but in a futon in this pretty, unfamiliar house, feeling sore but healthy. Three pairs of eyes met his and he realized he wasn't dreaming at all.

This was real. Kacchan was here. Their last ditch gamble had paid off, and Kacchan had helped. This was Izuku's chance.

So here he is, listening to Kacchan recall a million traumatic experiences with a casual, dismissive tone, listening to him explain how him dying isn't dying and his soul only *lives* in his body instead of being part of it. Kacchan with his pale hair and freckled skin scarred to the sky and back, so different yet so similar. Izuku still fears that if he closes his eyes for long enough, all of this will disappear. The salt in the air that reminds him of Takoba, the breeze, and the scent of an incoming storm, Kacchan.

"Ballsack did kill me back then, and the Germaphobe did too. Yesterday I died twice. I think I've died—" He squints. "Six times, total? Seven? Something like that."

How can he say that so carelessly, when the mere thought makes Izuku want to cry?

"S'not just about dying, the soul stuff. Like, this finger—" He holds up his right thumb, twists and rolls it. "I damaged the nerves breaking it. But it still works. Same for my wrist." It's got a thick white scar that makes Izuku flinch. "Other shit too. You get the point."

Better than ever he understands why everyone and their moms want to get their hands on Kacchan. If he can tear quirks apart from the inside while having left his body, making it impossible to hurt him in the real world, well, that solves a lot of problems. There's a reason

Sensei wants him on their side. Hearing the full truth of it only makes him agree with Sensei's assessment further.

"At UA, you told Sensei you aren't a good person, or a hero," Izuku recalls. "Why?"

"What do you mean, why? You know why. You know why better than everyone."

"We were kids, Kacchan. You were stupid and mean but everyone around us was—"

"Don't make fucking excuses."

"Only if you stop being hung up on it. I don't care anymore. I won't forget it, but *I don't care*. You've taken Eri-chan in, haven't you? You saved her from Overhaul. My mom told me you worry about her like a parent. And—" He holds up his bandaged arms. "you helped me. You helped Todoroki-kun when you could have kicked us out."

"I'm not a total monster, *yipee*—"

"Stop that. If I've forgiven you years ago, isn't it time you forgive yourself?"

"I've *killed* people, Izuku," he says quietly.

"Because they tried to hurt you first. Nemoto was a monster. Would you not have done it again, if it meant he wouldn't get to hurt you, or Eri-chan?"

"…Of course."

"Then stop. Stop blaming yourself for having to make difficult decisions after being forced into difficult situations. It's— it's stupid. You've been through so much, and I hate how you've come out of it feeling like you're the monster." I hate that something that was supposed to help both of us turned into this.

Kacchan laughs, not yet entirely convinced. "Since when did you become pro-murder? It sounds like you've been thinking this shit over." Izuku doesn't want to admit he has, for three years he *has* been thinking this shit over. In those times when he's feeling down, or he can't distract himself long enough, can't fill his hours with endless tasks that'll leave him too tired to overthink, Kacchan's story replayed in his brain. He analyzed everything he knew, drafted elaborate

scenarios, and thought up exactly what he'd say. It was an unhealthy coping mechanism and he knew it, but Kacchan being a fixture in his life since forever and being ripped from it overnight, in the way things happened, wasn't something one got over. His bouts of daydreaming and Kacchan-related frenzy dropped in frequency, sure, but he'd never forgotten or given up looking.

"The truth is I…" He swallows, his mouth dry. This isn't something he's ever wanted to admit. It's so personal and intimate he feels disgusting even considering saying it out loud. It's weird. But the Vestiges have teased him over it long enough (yes, they've noticed negative mentions of Kacchan he gets defensive over have been the reason for half his extra quirks unlocking and he's noticed it too, as much as he tries to suppress the feeling for his own sanity) and it might help Kacchan to hear it. "I always thought you were a hero. When we were kids, in middle school, at UA, all the time. Remember how I told you I looked up to you when you broke into my room?"

"Yeah."

"I meant it. When I—" He can't believe he's actually admitting this. "When I pictured 'hero' inside my head. There was All Might… and there was you. You were strong and passionate, and kind of insane when you went up against villains, but you always looked like you knew what you were doing… like you belonged. I wanted that… I wanted to be like you, I wanted to *belong*… to stand next to you like we promised when we were kids. That's why I copied you. I stole your moves… When I wanted to defeat a villain real bad, I'd start running my mouth, saying stupid things… that part, the taunting and the threatening that wasn't even a part of you I liked. But— but I imitated it anyway—" To this day the Kacchan-talk breaks out sometimes. "Because… you're my image of victory." There. He's said it. He knows he's crying tears of frustration. "It sounds so weird but it's true. I still think about you when I think about what it means to win. I've always thought about you. So don't you dare say you aren't heroic. Because that means all the good parts of you I admired, all the reasons I stuck around you for even when you were *so fucking mean*, the passion and the will and the strength and the power to look at an iron wall and smile as it weren't there at all and—"

Izuku bites his tongue, has said too much. Kacchan's staring, shocked. Then he says, "Fuck," eloquently and slides down the trunk of the tree until he's sitting on the sand. "I thought *you* were the heroic one. You were quirkess and wimpy and weak but you still tried to help me out of that creek like I *needed* it, like you didn't care if you hurt yourself

as long as you could help me. ” What creek is he talking about? “ I started thinking maybe you were the strong one and you knew it and you were taking pity on the rest of us. And again with the sludge, you were supposed to be weak but you ran in there anyway when all the ‘strong’ people with quirks only watched— fuck, I hated it so much. How you’d fling yourself out there like you didn’t give a shit as long as you got to save someone and god, I couldn’t do that so I couldn’t stand looking at it.” Looking down, his fingers curl into the sand. “I was fucking stupid—”

“But that’s old news now Kacchan.”

“You’re right,” he says, surprising Izuku. “All of it is old news. Including that strength and will. I’m not who I used to be anymore, Izuku.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Well, start believing it. Because I can’t do what I used to do anymore. I can’t look at ‘walls’ and grin like a dumbfuck with more self-confidence than brain cells… Every time I think about facing the League I’m back there all over again and I don’t want to be back there ever again. I’m fucking… I’m fucking terrified and I don’t even get why because I don’t care if I—” He stops short, not wanting to say whatever he was going to admit.

“I’m scared too. I know I’m All Might’s successor so I’m not supposed to be but I am, I can’t control it. Only a few know right now, but it was obvious I was being targeted for a reason yesterday, and people are going to have questions I’ll need to answer. And once everyone knows everyone will rely on me. The thought of messing that up and losing people in the process terrifies me too.” It’s not the exact same, of course, it isn’t. The League, as much as they’ve hurt Izuku, have never hurt him half as much in three years as they did Kacchan in a month. But it’s similar enough that Kacchan may understand. “And All for One’s strong, strong enough that I don’t know if I could beat him on my own, I don’t know if he’s even beatable with physical strength. It’s going to take more than that.” Especially if he wants to make his plan of saving Shimura Tenko a reality. They’ve learned an awful lot about the real identity of Shigaraki these last few years, most pried from boasting from All for One himself. He’d give anything, anything to fight with Kacchan again, beside him as equals.

“…What the fuck happened to us, huh?”

“We grew up.”

“Growing up sucks ass.”

They sit for a while, five minutes or fifteen, he’s not sure. Izuku watches the waves crash with the shore, watches them darken the sand and sweep away stones. The clouds in the distance are a putrid grey. Last time he and Kacchan went to the beach together, they were three and four and building sandcastles.

+ + +

“I’ll help you,” Katsuki says. Izuku looks up at him and their eyes meet. “I could… do medical shit, heal people, help you arrange whatever quirk crap you’re planning to defeat Hands with better...” He’s got something in his head Izuku won’t agree with, so he’ll keep that to himself. His legs are cramping so he makes to stand. Katsuki had known what they were going to talk about before they came here, and he’d known what his answer would be too. He’ll help. Not because he owes it to anyone or because it’s his duty or any of that crap. Not to fuck over the League or help the Commission or the people or Aizawa or Deku, even.

But because he *hates* being a sitting duck while the world falls apart around him. In his desperate struggles to erase the parts of himself he used to hate, he’s also suppressed some of the few redeeming qualities old Bakugou thrived through. Because what does it matter how uncomfortable he is, how much he doesn’t want to face the League if Hands is as strong as everyone’s been telling him and he might… kill all the nerds yet? If the good guy might not win? Then he’s fucked, no matter how much he tries to stay out of it. Hands will have his ass of a world order and Katsuki can say goodbye to sane customers and university. There *won’t be* a society to live quietly within or a school to take Eri to.

She’s the core of this, in the end. If the heroes fuck this up she’ll never get the chance to grow up much less be happy. As much as he wants to ignore it All for One has made sure this is a subject that’s impossible to ignore. What good is what he wants if tomorrow there’s *no* goddamn world *left*?

And maybe a part of him, the most childish, hidden part, the part that kept an All Might card in his pocket for fifteen years and never got the chance to have it signed, still wants to be a hero. Not for the glory or the praise or the money or attention. Just to make that kiddy dream

true for five minutes and make his kid proud.

That's it. It's that simple. He can make more of a difference than any of the people chasing after him know, and if that difference means guaranteeing a better future, he'll do it. Lest he wallows in (more) guilt forever.

"Fuck the HPSC and the law and whatever other bullshit I can't come back due to. It's an emergency situation and—" Izuku's walked right up to him in this time, and for a moment he thinks he's gonna get that handshake Katsuki refused more than a decade ago. But the nerd, like the nerd that he is, hugs him. It's been three years since anyone outside his atrocious circle of quarter-aged women, old ladies, kids, and giant cats has hugged him, and fuck if it doesn't feel good.

"It's fine. You don't have to explain yourself. For now… I'm happy you're here."

"Nerd."

"I'm not the one in university without having finished high school. Or the one who became a doctor in two years."

It starts to rain, then. Sparse but fat drops. Katsuki flinches when one lands on his ear and he pushes Deku away.

"Let's go home. I fucking hate the rain."

Chapter End Notes

1) 362 destroyed me so take rainy kacchan feels
2) this is kinda where my problems with the structure of the fic really show. because this scene of katsuki and deku talking was planned from the very start. but i don't feel i gave enough attention to deku's end of the story and their development and ease of interaction here might feel a little unwarranted
3) similarly, while i know where I'm taking eri, shouto kinda in the air and still loosely following canon here
4) I'm not that happy with this shouto but better done than perfect and never finished as they say
5) everything medical in this is mostly utter bs
6) basically the vestiges are part of deku's aura, and keeping them visible requires concentration. similarly, if he tries hard enough, he can prevent them from meterializing as he did here. i made this up because i wanted an excuse not to have the vestiges there for the private bkdk talk

7) i know many of you aren't fans of katsuki helping the heroes, but i hope his reasoning is logical. he was gonna be embroiled in this wether her liked it or not, because you can't really ignore the end of the world
8) izuku here is also a lot more mentally healthy and doesn't have those toxic gotta do things solo can't put anyone else in danger mindsets which is why he's okay asking katsuki for help
9) i know that with izuku in third year and all his quirks unlocked he should theoretically be ridiculously strong but we're just gonna rely on twice fuckery and pretend shigaraki is composed entirely of prime all nights as he is in canon. no star and stripe in this fic either.
10) god this is a mess
11) i love all of you who've been hanging on even through these trying times of bimonthly updates I'm sorry for not having the motivation to churn these out faster

Chapter 36: Plan of Attack pt.1

Chapter Summary

Katsuki plays Doctor while the heros scheme

Chapter Notes

So... um... surprise?

(Note! Ive made some changes to previous chapters so that Uraraka's section here makes sense. for plot purposes, she wasn't part of the group who saw katsuki in the infirmary room)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ochako screws in the final load bearing bolt. She wipes the sweat off her brow with her forearm and sets the wrench she's been holding onto down into the nearest supply cart. "All done," she calls, stepping back as a bunch of the insulation team, mostly engineering and mechanics students with time to spare, tack their temporary structure with tarps and blanket-like coverings. Their work is efficient, practiced, guided easily and naturally by talent though they've likely never done a job like this before.

Ochako may not have their brains, but she doesn't fall behind.

"You're good." She's a bit jumpy as Hatsune walks up behind her, but the tone is unbalanced and, hence, recognizable.

"Practice makes perfect."

Though her parents mostly deal in concrete and steel structures, she's helped build enough wooden molds for pouring and wooden structures for the smaller odder jobs her parents took to make ends meet that she's known her way around a drill and table saw since age twelve. They never rejected a job, her folks, regardless of how small it was, how inconveniently located, or how outside their comfort zone it was. Money is money, they'd say. The construction industry is a fickle thing, and competition is tight, especially with the spread of quirk-powered prefabrication. You made the most out of the good times, squeezed out every cent you could before the cycle inevitably came to a halt that, though brief, could decimate a family without savings. For more than a decade, since before she was born, her parents had lived frugally, pinching every penny, hopping from contractor to contractor,

from bad working conditions to shitty ones, all so they could save up for two things: start up money for their own construction company, and, once her dreams became clear, though for reasons undisclosed to them, Ochako's UA tuition.

She ended up earning herself a full-ride scholarship, but the money still helped pay for her room in Musutafu, which she would've never been able to afford without working on top of their impossible schedule. Her parents had made her dream possible, so when they told her dropping everything to personally attend the sports festival hundreds of miles away from her hometown would seriously hurt their newly funded business, she accepted it the way she'd accepted the lack of anything growing up, with a smile on her face. She understood. They'd been swamped with work as of late, what with villain attacks getting more common and need for renovation more widespread. Mom and Dad were far too kind for their own good however, their insistence against exploitation making them horrible businesspeople, which meant they had to work thrice as hard for the amount of money a contractor more blood sucking would earn through one job.

Still, she understands.

She's almost grateful they aren't here right now.

Ochako called them at the first chance she got — they claimed to be safe — apart from an initial rush of refugees from more demolished cities, their little town remained untouched. She made them swear to stay put, to forget about work and focus on protecting themselves.

Because she's here, dozens of hours away, building shelters for other people's families.

"You should join us." Hatsune emphasizes the 'us' like Ochako is speaking to a secret agent of the League and not their star mechanic.

"I'm much more useful where I am." Ochako shrugs. "Why are you doing grunt work?" Hatsune would be better off constructing death lasers and indestructible armour and "babies" for the general ed students or something.

"This 's more important," she says before yelling at some freshies to get a move on a staple on the tarps faster — *people are freezing here!*

Spurned on, Ochako gets back to work and helps the overwhelmed kids get the insulation on straight. The sun is setting for the second

time since the sports festival.

She's not even eighteen herself, not for a few months, but it's stunning to her how much of a difference even two or so years make. The first years seem to her like literal kids, wide-eyed and inexperienced in a way she was never allowed to be, not at UA, not growing up. Her class is disproportionately prepared compared to everyone else in this place bar the pros. They can't afford not to be when they've kept getting attacked and attacked and attacked since their first week stepping foot in this school. It makes her feel an extra sense of responsibility, one she's not sure she can manage to shoulder.

It takes them about a half hour more to finish lining the floors with waterproof materials and double check everything is correctly fastened and fixed together. Once they're about as sure as they can get, they let civilians filter in. The sports festival itself meant there were tens of thousands of people trapped in here before the UA wall went up. Since the attack ended, there's been a massive influx of refugees from the outer skirts and center of Musutafu. Though the UA breach has done a number on how safe they appear to the general public, most people would rather be protected by the massive militarized wall than in its line of fire.

UA is fully equipped to be an emergency shelter under normal circumstances, but the attack of two nights ago damaged their infrastructure greatly, hence the temporary housing being a necessity at all. They allow the civilians to filter in calmly, instruct them to grab one of the folded up cot frames they've dumped in the middle of the tarp and show everyone how to assemble theirs.

"The heroes have been scheming all day, no?" Hatsune throws in. "Aren't you missing out?"

"This 's more important," Ochaco throws back easily. Hatsume's lips stretch into an easy smirk, almost as if to say, *good one.*

She's not much for boring meetings after boring meetings. She doesn't consider herself the kind of smart that can plan in advance. Ochako doesn't have that great a feel for fronts and war tactics and whatever else was being discussed in the few minutes she'd bothered to peek inside the main meeting hall. Acting on the fly, coming up with practical solutions under pressure, that's much more her ball game, that's how she was raised. Planning is good and all, but to expect everything to go your way all the time is laughable. They'd planned for the League to attack two weeks from now and look where that's

gotten them.

“Miss—”

“Uravity,” she fills in on autopilot, snapping out of her thoughts to consider the large burly man adressing her.

“Uravity,” he corrects. “I hope y’all don’t expect all of us to fit on these tiny things…”

It’s almost laughable how small the cot is in comparison to the man. He looks like he’s holding one of those toy strollers toddlers put their dolls into.

“Ah, sorry,” she says, and the man laughs, not having expected it. “Why don’t you give that to someone else? I’ll find you a bigger one.”

She exits the tarp and makes for Dorm B, one of the few that remained relatively unscathed. The route toward it is damn near apocalyptic. Dorm A, theirs, is a charred and mangled mess, bones of rebar jutting out of demolished reinforced concrete like badly broken limbs all over. She hasn’t looked inside for her belongings, hasn’t had the time or will. People are dead, hundreds, thousands, people she knew, people who’ve taught her, all gone. Gigantomachia stomped clean holes through the stadium; half of it has been blown off like a gaping wound. Dorm F is splattered red and looks like it was bombed from the inside. In front of Dorm C there’s a line of people waiting for food that stretches along the entire campus. Dorm G is…

It’s a catastrophe; much worse things have happened than her cheap room of cheap belongings being burnt to a crisp, but she still refuses to enter their building and see what’s salvageable. It won’t be much, and the magnitude of pain of losing what little things she’s worked to buy is sure to cause her will only serve to remind her of how selfish she is. Because even in the face of all this tragedy, what hurts her the most is the loss of her own things, of her own people.

She finds Momo looking worse for the wear in Dorm B’s main hall. The place has been transformed into a transport and storage room. Dozens of students Ochako doesn’t recognize sort their disaster supplies into piles, pack them up to be delivered where they’re needed. She even spots a few civilians in the mix, helping out where they can. Momo’s station is a bit to the side, in what used to be 3-B’s storage closet. It’s small, and cramped, and stinks of the greasy fast food the UA cantine serves on special occasions. Momo’s cheeks are sunken in and her skin seems thin though she’s scarfing down a

massive bucket of fatty crisps like a competitive eater with one hand and spitting supplies out the other.

“I have a list,” she says, foregoing greetings. Said list rolls by on the tablet in front of Momo as she ticks items off at record speed.

“How long have you been doing this?” Ochako asks.

“Since the attack stopped,” Momo replies without missing a beat.

“Have you slept?” The dark rings under her eyes are answer enough. “Me neither,” Ochako says, because her friend needs support much more than she does apologies.

“What do you need?” Momo asks, and Ochako feels a little bad for how exploitative this whole thing is.

“A cot,” she says nonetheless. “A big one for this massive guy.” For reference, she motions his general proportions with her hands. Not three seconds later the finished product is in her hands, so fast there’s not even time to gape.

“You’re amazing,” she says, and Momo can only respond with an exhausted half-smile. The amount of knowledge her quirk takes to operate at this skill level is mind-boggling to Ochako. Yaoyorozou has studied the exact chemical and material build up of every object and product she can create. She knows exact proportions, dimensions, fastenings, mechanical connections needed to make things like a cot at all functional. She can turn one element of her body into every other imaginable within split seconds.

In all honesty, Ochako doesn’t even come close to understanding how.

She’s about to thank Momo and leave before she gets even more stuck in her brain when her friend beats her to the chase.

“I heard they’re holding a funeral tomorrow,” Momo says. Ochako freezes, her own tired smile awkward and statuesque on her face. “For all the dead,” she expands, as though Ochako has no clue who funerals are for. “Midnight-sensei too.”

“I know,” she says tightly. It’s soon, but having hundreds of unattended corpses rotting away next to the living while they try to recover what little hope they have left is a recipe for disaster. The sooner they get closure, the better, not just for emotional reasons, for practical ones too. And yet…

Are you going?" Momo asks.

Ochako hates funerals. She hates wallowing and sitting around and doing nothing, and. She hates being helpless. Hates…

Hates that so many people she cares about are gone, or injured, or missing entirely.

Deku is missing. Todoroki too. There's a good chance they were captured and taken during the attack. There's a good chance they're— they're dead for good.

If Ochako goes back to what's left of her room. If Ochako attends all these funerals. If Ochako throws dirt onto these graves or lights this pyre, won't that make it all permanent? Won't that make it real?

She doesn't want this to be her reality.

"Probably," she says regardless, because she knows herself, and she knows that no matter how much she refuses to accept this she won't forgive herself if she misses it. "I heard that," she starts in a desperate need to change the subject. "I heard Bakugou was here." It's been ages since she's said that name at all, much less to Momo. "Before it all happened."

"So did I," Momo says quietly.

"You hear anything else?"

"No."

She treads back toward the makeshift camps dejected, taking in every detail and scent of destruction with every step. The air is thick, the darkening sky is beginning to cloud in what will surely be a rather shittily timed storm. Her boots are dirty all the way to the knee, and she's still wearing the costume with rips and blood on it that lets all the evening chill in. All of this— all of this sucks— she allows herself the grace to admit, allows her eyes to go watery and her breath to shudder here where no one will notice it. They weren't prepared for this. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. The sports festival was supposed to be a time for joy, for celebration, not for…

She stumbles as a group of kids zips past her. They've balled together a bundle of dirty rags, fashioned it into a ball, and they're throwing it at each other like they're in their backyard. Like the world isn't ending. Somehow, these kids have found a way to laugh even in the

face of death.

Pull yourself together, Uravity.

She straightens her shoulders and speeds up her way to camp with forced vigor. She presents the guy his new cot and relishes in his simple satisfaction. One step at a time. She has to take this one step at a time. All of this is happening for a reason.

Everything will fall into its proper place. Everything will be okay.

Only if she believes that can she make it okay.

“Ochako,” she nearly jumps at the voice, only vaguely familiar, and turns to be met with Midoriya Inko’s massive green eyes, wide and blown open in a way that can only be described as watery. She looks like she’s been crying, but Ochako has also never seen her seem otherwise. “Have you— do you know where Izuku is?”

All she can do is shake her head. “Oh god,” Deku’s mom breathes, hitchy. “Is he— is he—”

“He’s missing,” Ochako finally says aloud, putting them both out of their misery. She helps Mrs. Midoriya sit. “I’m sorry. We haven’t been able to locate or contact him and Shouto since yesterday.”

“Oh god,” Mrs Midoriya might be on the verge of wailing. “If I hadn’t — If I’d—” It’s cut off by a choked breath. She rubs at her eyes desperately.

“It’s not your fault,” Ochao tries to assure softly, double as grateful not to have to do this for her own parents. “No one expected it. I’m sure Deku is safe somewhere, along with Shouto. It’s possible they were blown past the wall during the battle.

“And Katsuki?” she asks, throwing Ochako for a loop.

“Katsuki…?” Ochako echoes dumbly.

“Bakugou,” Mrs. Midoriya fills in. “I— I— I ran into him about halfway through the festival, at Izuku’s panel talk, and he— he begged me not to tell anyone he was here because it would— it would— But I did anyway, a few hours later. I told Izuku and he promised he’d deal with it and—”

“Mrs. Midoriya, please, try to calm down,” Ochako coaxes, buying

herself time to come to terms with this new information.

“Where’s Katsuki?” a gruffer voice demands.

Looks like she’s not going to get that time.

She squeezes her eyes shut to no avail. When she reopens them, Bakugou’s clone in female form is still staring her down with a desperate fire in her eyes. Nostalgia for their first (and only) battle back in the first year hits Ochako like a freight train. It would be lying to say Bakugou is someone she thinks about much. His story is a complicated one, and though she’s never quite grasped why, she knows Deku cared and cares about him deeply. Beyond that, Bakugou had been, at the time of his disappearance, a near stranger to her. The one prickly classmate at the front who just wouldn’t stop screaming.

The one prickly classmate who’d been the only person in their entire year to take her seriously.

“Where’s my son?” Bakugou’s mom demands. Ochako feels a headache building. The woman makes for an odd juxtaposition, her dress suit more expensive than Ochako’s apartment, wrinkled and stained, her face tired yet somehow clear skinned, her hair, clearly unstyled and messy, perfectly suited to the front page of Vogue Japan.

“Honey—” a man, another version of Bakugou that has all the wrong features, attempts to calm her down. “Let’s not crowd her—” he says, while in fact crowding Ochako, like he’s only half assedly intervening in the name of keeping up appearances.

“Fuck that—” Oh wow, this lady is going to give Ochako flashbacks. “You’re in Class 3-A, aren’t you? Tell us what you know!”

“Look, I—” Ochako stammers.

“Please. *Anything*. You found him, right—”

“I—”

“You have to have found him—!”

She clears her throat forcefully. Bakugou’s parents snap their mouths shut and even Deku’s mom has called a brief intermission on her crying to stare at her wide-eyed.

Ochako stares past them. “I don’t know what happened to either of them,” she says slowly, levelly. “Shortly before the attack, we got word some of the Senseis had found someone they thought was Bakugou, but again, I wasn’t there personally. ” She’d been on the other side of the stadium, still recovering from her fight with Izuku, and had been too tired to go running with everyone else when news of Bakugou hit them. After that, the League attack had happened so abruptly that there’d been no time for messing around. “We’re— we’re not sure where Deku and Shouto are right now, but you could ask Kirishima, maybe. Aizawa-sensei should also know—”

“That’s right. Eraserhead. Where is he?” Bakuggou’s mom demands. Ochako is surprised she’s not started shaking the heck out of Ochako yet.

“— but he’s currently still recovering.”

“Recovering from what?” Bakugou’s dad asks, almost scared to do so.

“The attack,” Ochako says vaguely, the mere thought of it making her stomach queasy. The number of times Sensei has gotten himself beat up on their behalf during these three short years of school is kind of worrying. “He was still in a coma in the morning.”

A gentle sound of raindrops begins to hit the tarp roof and grows in a crescendo.

“What happened?” Inko asks, horrified.

“He should wake up.” Ochako delivers the good news first. “Recovery girl induced the coma to make recovery easier on his body.”

“Recovery from what?” Bakugou’s mom continues to press.

“His leg, they had to amputate it,” Ochako fills in. “And he’s lost an eye.”

“Fuck,” Bakugou’s mom finally relents, getting out of Uraraka’s space to plant herself next to Mrs. Midoriya. “For fuck’s sake.”

“Doesn’t his quirk…?”

“He’ll manage,” Ochako says curtly, a lie to herself just as much as to them. Sensei *has* to manage. He always does. Ochako’s already lost one teacher. She can’t afford to lose any more.

“I’m so sorry, Mitsuki,” Deku’s mom pleads, the tears back from their brief holiday. “If I’d convinced him to turn himself in right away, then maybe—”

“No, no, it wouldn’t have made a difference. Those damned monsters would have still attacked and—”

They’ve completely turned away from her now, stuck in their own little world. It’s by watching them and how remarkably similar they are to their children that Ochako can finally get a sense of why in the world Deku ever bothered so much with Bakugou in the first place. They’re almost a parallel world, a what could’ve been of that relationship if Bakugou had been the slightest bit more mature and Deku the slightest bit more assertive. Ten percent of a funhouse mirror.

Thunder rumbles outside. The tent is complaining of cold. Ochako can also feel the chill creep into her bones. Those rips in her costume aren’t helping. She needs a change of clothes. She needs a shower. She needs—

She unzips the entrance to the tarp and freezes.

Ochako squeezes her eyes shut again. When she reopens them, Bakugou’s washed-out cousin is still staring her down with dead eyes. She’s so shocked, so convinced she’s hallucinating from fatigue, she can’t even manage to let out a noise. All that comes out of her throat is a pitiful croak.

“*Ba*—” In her split seconds of shock, pseudo-Bakugou has taken note of who exactly is in that tarp, because he shuts her mouth with a palm, drags her out into the pouring rain, and zips the tarp back up at lightning speed. He pulls her further and further away from the camp, towards two figures in rain hoods. Fed up, Ochako bites his palm and yanks herself free of his grip.

“Fucking *ow*, Round Face,” pseudo-Bakugou says. Surely, Ochako must be tripping.

“Are you crazy?!” she shoves him, voice loud. “You can’t just drag people willy-nilly—”

“Shhhh!! That tent is full of— of fucking *parents*, the whole fucking circus,” Pseudo-Bakugou responds in a whisper shout, shuddering in a

way that Ochako finds entirely overdramatic. This must be her hallucination. The Bakugou she remembers from first year was not this pale, or this tall, nor did he have these weird marks on his face. Has he been dropped in bleach or something?

It's only when they stop in front of the two hooded figures and she's met with none other than Deku and Shouto that Ochako lets herself finally swear for the first time since this hellish endeavor started.

"What the fuck?"

It's been years since Katsuki has last seen her, but Round Face hasn't changed much. Her cheeks are still round and pink, she's still got the poofy brown hair, though a little longer, and the ridiculous space boots. Her aura is just as ridiculous as her, all translucent pink bubbles.

"Deku-kun, Todoroki, you're okay!"

He steps aside and lets the nerds have their nerdy hugs and security identity checks, shifting awkwardly. He digs his heel into the muddy dirt. The rain is starting to soak his pant legs despite the coat. It's cold and wet and disgusting out here, and he's positive his eyes weren't playing tricks on him regarding who was in that tent.

Why is he doing this again?

Right. End of the world and all that.

What a fucking joke.

"This is nice and all, but can we get a move on? It's storming out here," he interrupts after too much sappy muttering and buddy-buddy behavior for his liking. The UA wall interrupts the horizon, boxing him in, and quite frankly, the inside of the campus is a flaming mess.

"Oh, right, sorry, we should go back into the t—"

"No," Katsuki says forcefully. "Where've you set up medical? I need to talk to whoever this place considers big guns in that department."

"I'm sorry," Round Face blinks at him, then turns to Deku. "This is Bakugou, right?"

"It's Katsuki now, Cheeks, and I'm right fucking here."

“Good to know you’re still an asshole,” Round Face has the gall to say, and it sends a rush of contentedness through Katsuki he doesn’t feel like unpacking right now. Finally, finally someone who’s treating him like a normal fucking human being. “Where’ve you been?”

“Long story.”

“What happened to your…?” she motions vaguely in the direction of her face.

“Got ran over by a hippopotamus.”

“How does that even—”

“Round Face,” he snaps. “Focus. Where’s your medical?”

“They’ve got a war council thing going in the library.”

Did Katsuki fucking ask?

“The one in the main building?” Deku jumps in. It may be off-topic, but they’re moving away from the dredged circus tent at last. Katsuki feels a bit better with every step they take, that is, until UA’s main building, half of it missing, comes closer and closer into view. That’s when the dread starts hitting. Why the fuck is he doing this again?

Right. End of the world. End of the motherfucking world.

“It’s been running since yesterday. They’ve got most of the heroes who aren’t on recovery duty talking in there.”

“About…?”

“War things. I don’t know. They want to mount some kind of full-scale attack on the League. Take the fight back to them or something.” Sounds like a massive pain in the ass.

“Who and who’s in the meeting?”

“Any of the top twenty heroes who were here, like Endeavor and Hawks, ” abuser one and abuser two, “some of our teachers, Cementos, Mic,” irrelevant one and irrelevant two, “All Might, ” all skeleton, “Sir Nighteye,” future freak, “HPSC commissioners—”

“Yeah, fuck that,” Katsuki interrupts. Why had he wanted their HQ in the first place? He doesn’t want to sit in on their idiotic plans. There’s a good chance they’ve got no clue what they’re talking about anyway.

Katsuki would rather leave the planning to Deku.

"*Where is your medical wing?*" he asks for the nth time, because that's where he could actually be useful.

"But—"

"Kacchan, this could be important information, we have to sit in—"

"You have to sit in," Katsuki corrects. "I'm quirkless, Deku. I can't win your war for you. Let me help where I can."

"Since when are you—"

"Kacchan, you— you have crucial details about the League and Underground and All for One nobody there has. It's surely better if you—"

"Listen, just tell me what you decided to do after you've sat in, yeah?" He doesn't feel much like listening to a bunch of HPSC goons yap for hours on end. "Your buddy Hawks knows more about the League than me anyway."

They all seem confused. "Why would he?"

"He's been spying on them for years, duh."

"What?" God, these guys are clueless.

"I'm not sure it's spying anymore, to be honest. Maybe he's flat out joined them. You ought to watch yourself around him."

"Why didn't you mention any of this before, Kacchan?!"

Katsuki shrugs, restless. "Didn't seem relevant. But yeah. Don't listen to his plans. He'll just get you to try and kill yourself."

"What?!"

"Halfie, you make sure Deku doesn't kill himself, yeah?" Once Todoroki's tentatively nodded, Katsuki turns back to Round Face. "Your medical wing?" he demands.

"Gym Beta," she responds on autopilot, instantly regretting it when Katsuki actually begins to leave in that direction. "You can't just barge in here after two years without explaining yourself and— and—" She grabs at his wrist. Her wet bangs stick to the sides of her face.

“Look,” he says, meeting her eyes. For some reason, she flinches and lets him go. “You guys are the heroes. You do your jobs and go to here meeting while I do mine, okay?” he says, feeling a bit guilty. “My life story ain’t gonna help with jack shit, we gotta sort out our priorities, yeah?”

“But, Kacchan—”

“No buts. Go to your little meeting and make your little plans. You do what you’re good at I’ll do what I’m good at. That was the deal.”

“Heroism is what you’re good at.”

“Izuku.” Katsuki interrupts curtly. He doesn’t know if he should order Izuku to shut up or beg him to. Both are pathetic.

“Okay,” Deku relents. “But you’ll— you’ll be here later, right? You’ll stay?”

“Not going anywhere, nerd.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

The kid stops ugly crying, sucks up his snot to stare up at Katsuki. His aura’s green, slippers. He’s got lizard scales climbing up his neck, sparse. Might be young enough the quirk is only just coming in. He wouldn’t have needed Round Cheeks’ instruction to figure out Gym Beta had been made the makeshift hospital, you could smell the disinfectant from down the street and hear all the wailing and from further.

“W-who are— y—you?” God he’s ugly. His face is kind of droopy and melty from all the crying to boot.

“Katsuki,” he says simply. “I can fix whatever’s wrong with you.”

“H—how?!”

“You gotta show me what’s wrong first.”

“My— my arm.” He holds out the mangled thing. Either he went for a dip in a glass swimming pool or a window shattered on him, because its slashed from wrist to shoulder, with a massive shard sticking out right above his elbow. Katsuki is surprised the kid had the peace of mind not to immediately yank the shard out.

He leans down, takes a solid look at the entire limb. Nothing local anesthetic a needle and some suturing string can't fix.

"Okay," he says. "And why are you out here?" Rain patters onto the gym's awning.

"Stinks inside."

Maybe this kid's not so bad.

They make their way in, snaking through more people crying or waiting or both, overrun nurses and students, crash carts, grumbling medibots… Katsuki locates a cart full of supplies and sits the kid down.

"Wait your ass here while I wash my hands, yeah?"

The kid does as he's told. It's remarkable how easily Katsuki can blend in with the rest of the medical personnel so long as he acts like he belongs. He doesn'T even bother to keep his hood down. Everything about him is so old news and his appearance has changed so much Bakugou Katsuki isn't even a blip on anyone here's radars. He finds LAT gel in the same cart as the curved suture needles and special threads, returns to the kid with everything in hand.
After gloving himself up, he takes a closer look at the wounds. The kid hisses.

"Don't worry," Katsuki says. "They're not bad."

The less severe ones are first to go. He cleans them up and dresses them, mostly with specialized high grade band aids. All in all, the kid has about three cuts that actually need suturing, one of them the one with glass still sticking out of it.
He cleans up the area and prepares to put the needle in for the first suture before realizing the kid has gone unnaturally quiet and — oh— Katsuki nearly forgot the lidocaine. He's not supposed to suture without numbing first. Unlike him, this brat actually feels stuff.

"What's that?" the kid asks as Katsuki spreads the numbing gel carefully onto the infected areas. "Feels weird."

"That's the point. The needle won't hurt like this," Katsuki explains curtly. He taps his foot impatiently.

"What's wrong?" the kid asks, nervous. For a second, Katsuki is scared he'll start bawling again.

“Nothing. Takes a bit to kick in is all.”

“Oh,” he kicks his legs against the air. They don’t even reach the floor. “Who are you?”

“Katsuki,” Katsuki repeats, already annoyed. This is like Eri when she was five all over again, except he doesn’t give a rat’s ass about this kid.

“Why are your eyes like that?”

“Got into a fight with a bear.”

“Really?”

“No. Tried to swap them out.”

“You can do that?”

“Nope.”

“So what happened really?”

“Bad science experiment,” he says, because it’s not exactly that far from the truth.

“Is that why your hair also looks creepy? It’s so white. Are you old?”

“Eighteen, thanks,” he says sarcastically, unsure of why he’s so willingly relinquishing his real age. The kid doesn’t notice, but he also doesn’t notice as Katsuki starts the first line of sutures, so he considers that a win.

“You’re welcome. Are you a hero?”

“Nope.”

“Did you come for the Sports festival? I had to beg my parents to take me.”

“My little sister wanted to see it, so, I came for her.”

“Don’t you like heroes yourself?” This little shit. Katsuki hates children.

“Heroes suck.”

The kid gasps like he's personally offended.

"No way. Heroes keep the world safe."

"That's a nice thought."

"I love heroes. You know, my favorite is Gang Orca. He has a mutation quirk, like me and he looks all big and scary, but he's actually very nice. I met him once."

"Right. Gang whale."

"Orca," corrects the kid, indignant.

Katsuki ties off the second line of stitches and threads a fresh needle for the final wound.

"This one might hurt a little," he warns, but doesn't give the brat enough time to react before he's pulled the glass shard out and tamponaded the wound. The bleeding seems manageable, so it looks like they've avoided nicking any arteries. Still, the kid yelps, repeating ouch under his breath unsteadily.

"You're a tough brat," Katsuki says.

"N-not a brat—" his voice is shaky, like he's about to cry. Katsuki can't have that.

"My turn to ask questions. How'd you get this?"

"O-one of the villains threw Ingenium t-through a window and the glass landed on me," he stutters out, young enough to have found the whole thing cool instead of scary. Katsuki winces.

"Did four eyes live?"

He's asking for research purposes, not because he gives a damn about Four Eyes or anything.

"Four eyes?"

"Ingenium."

"He got back up and kicked the villain away," the brat recounts with stars in his eyes.

"Dope," Katsuki says, and is about to do the last stitch when he's

shoved away. The kid jolts at the sudden movement, this time beginning to cry for real as the dangling needle puts tension on his wound. All of Katsuki's work, ruined. People just keep fucking yanking him today.

"What the fuck is *wrong* with you?" he demands, facing this lizard lady.

"What the fuck is wrong with *you*?!" she spits back, shielding who must be her kid behind her back like Katsuki is All for One or something. Her aura sticks to her skin like armour. "Get away from my son!"

"In case you haven't noticed, lady, your son has a needle dangling out of him right now!"

"He was helping me, mom—!" the brat has the courtesy to say, but his tiger— lizard mom doesn't seem to have any fucks to give.

"He's not a doctor, Tokage. He's not wearing a white coat like all the doctors are. Where did you run off to, huh? Don't scare me like that!" In her frenzy to make sure he's okay, she shakes him by the shoulders, jolting his wounds. Katsuki's put enough of the cream that it won't hurt, but it surely feels uncomfortable, as evidenced by the kid yelping.

"Mom, it hurts," he complains, and of course the crazy lady turns to Katsuki, as though all of this is somehow his fault.

"What did you do to him? What did you do to my son?"

"Nothing you nutcase," Katsuki answers, keeping his gaze pointedly away from all the attention the lady's hysterics are attracting. "You're the one hurting him by not letting me do my fucking job."

"This isn't your job. You aren't a doctor. You can't be qualified for this. You look like a child yourself!"

And this is why he wears a mask at work.

"Newsflash, Karen, look around you, all the people volunteering are fucking children. How old do you think UA freshies are, thirty?"

"Get away from my son!" the lady begins to actually yell. "This— this man is pretending to be a doctor and—"

“For fuck’s sake,” Katsuki mutters under his breath, prepares to yell back before the prod of a cane shuts the lady up.

“What’s going on here?” Recovery Hag’s haggard voice asks. “Do we have a problem?”

The sight of her instantly pacifies the situation, somehow. Katsuki tries his best to ignore her presence.

“This young man is pretending to be a doctor and— and butchering my son.”

“No— I’m trying to help your son while you butcher him by yanking him around like a maniac before I can finish suturing him.”

“You don’t know what your doing! Where did you even find him?!”

Yeah, this is not working.

“Outside, far away from you, because you fucking left him, fucking witch. Hea— Recovery Hag! Tell her!”

The old woman takes a measured glance at Katsuki, then at his perfectly spaced and tensioned sutures, then back at him. She doesn’t look happy about the way Katsuki’s addressed her, and for a second he fears she’ll turn her back on him too.

“Katsuki is also a volunteer of ours,” she finally explains, rolling with it. “He doesn’t like wearing his coat, but he’s perfectly qualified for a job like this.”

“But—”

“Trust me. We may be short staffed right now, but you’re in safe hands. Let Katsuki finish his work. You’re putting little Tokage here at higher risk for infection the longer his wound stays open. ”

After a bit more arguing the mother finally relents and Katsuki is allowed to return to work, but not before Recovery Hag drags him down and orders him to see her at her station as soon as he’s finished.

Fuck that.

Chiyo watches Bakugou from the corner of her eye for the whole evening. Having utterly ignored her instruction to come talk after

stitching the little kid up, he flitters about from bed to bed, from cot to cot, effortlessly finding solutions to as good as every problem. He works soundlessly, subtly, in a blink and you'll miss it kind of way, but his presence is certainly felt by the rest of the staff. For the first time since they were forced to open, all the patients in the waiting room have been dealt with by the evening.
The boy's efficiency is awe-inspiring, more suited to a professional with thirty times the experience. He has a feel for priorities it takes graduated doctors years on the job to develop.

It's difficult to believe this is the same boy who she had to resucitate a mere few days ago.

Chiyo has questions. A lot of them. But, for once she can be confident in someone else's abilities around here, so she decides to stick to her work to until they close for dinner time.

A lunch bot delivers them food from the food court building, a soup made of god knows what that's at least hot enough to feel good. Chiyo grabs two bowls and corners Bakugou before he can leave.

"We had a deal," she reminds, lodging her cane under his shirt to stop him from attempting to leave.

"I know," he grumbles, not looking at her.

"So where are you going?"

"Home," he says simply, unashamed.

"Sit down and have some food, will you, Baku—"

"Katsuki," he corrects, unhooks himself from her cane and turns with a dreary sigh.

He takes the bowl, spoon and chopsticks Chiyo's offering him, seems to lose a bit of tension upon stirring the soup about a bit.

Chiyo looks down at her own bowl and frowns. It's far from fancy, but it's about as good as an emergency clear broth soup can get. The vegetables in it are actually whole. That's a lot to ask. She'd never expected Bakugou to be picky with food.

"Sit with me, Katsuki," she says, and they find a spot a bit further away from the central commotion of the staff quietly celebrating the day's work.

For a while, all they do is eat. The kitchen did a good job, and they're hungry enough that it tastes that much better. Chiyo is reminded of when she was a child. Born on the nosebleeds of the second great quirk war, she still remembers how much her parents had to struggle to keep a child with a quirk like hers safe.

She's far older than she'd like to admit.

"Where did you learn to suture like that?" she ends up deciding to ask.

Katsuki pauses his eating. Chiyo hears his spoon clatter against his bowl.

"It's a long story," he says.

"I have time." She's always had time.

"I—" he thinks it over. "You have to promise not to tell anyone."

"Why does that matter?"

"It does if you want to keep helping as many people as possible."

She can't say she understands, but she's too old to bother arguing with him.

"It's our secret, boy."

"Right." Katsuki buys himself time by shoving a piece of mushroom into his mouth an chewing on it. "After I— After I escaped from the League in Kamino, I ended up apprenticing for a doctor. She was the only reason I made it out of there alive—" his mouth curls around the word like it's not quite the right one. "— in the first place."

"This must've been a great good deal of a doctor," Chiyo says. Kamino was only a little less than three years ago. It may have felt like a lot to all the people pining for Katsuki, but as far as training in the healthcare field goes, three years is nothing. Chiyo herself studied for something of a decade before becoming fully licensed, and this in spite of her quirk that essentially does all the work by itself.

"The best," Katsuki says with a fondness Chiyo doesn't remember him capable of. "She was healer hag to me but well, do you know Iki Koharu?"

Chiyo's eyes widen into saucers, for the first time in perhaps two decades. Does she know Iki Koharu?

The woman is basically the mother of quirk science.

“How have you managed to get yourself mixed up with the Hiryo clan?”

Katsuki’s face wrinkles. “Eugh,” he pretends to gag. “Not them. Healer Hag hated them.”

“I almost married into that family,” Chiyo divulges, half in the hope of encouraging Katsuki to open up more and half because she’s never had anyone to divulge it to who would understand.

“Dodged a massive bullet, I’ll tell you that,” Katsuki says, seeming to instantly understand why that marriage had been discussed as an arrangement in the first place. “But yeah, she took me in, fixed me up, dealt with my bullcrap and eventually offered me a job if I trained under her. I didn’t have many options at the time so…”

“Why?” Chiyo asks. She’d met Koharu a couple of times at conferences, always remembered her as a bright young star with a passion for science and little else. She’d seemed floaty to Chiyo, unfocused, far from caretaker material and what few conversations she’d had with other members of her family only supported her assumption. “Why would she do all of that for you?”

When Katsuki goes silent, Chiyo’s a bit afraid she’s asked an insensitive question and the boy will close up on her, but he cuts his rumination short before she can apologize. “I don’t know,” he says. “I think old age made her sappy.” He thinks about it for a beat longer. “And I guess I am quite interesting to a quirk scientist.”

Speaking of interesting. “I did a full set of labs on you after your… incident. Forgive me for the language, but what in the everloving god is going on there?”

“That’s an even longer story,” Katsuki says awkwardly. “But that whole situation, plus some things about me and the Hiryo clan changing since healer hag kicked the bucket means I won’t be left alone if whoever’s running your war council finds out about it.” He breathes in. “They’ll make me do other stuff I don’t want to do instead of letting me be useful where I am. I’m useful here, right? I’m damn good at this medical crap.”

He’s confident about it, but he’s also as good as pleading with Chiyo for outside confirmation.

“You are,” she assures, and she’s not lying about it either.

“RIght,” says Katsuki. “And I want to keep being that.” Chiyo would say he wants to do about a million other different things instead but can’t simply ignore the situation their country has succumbed to. “So if you got any more injured, particularly in critical condition, I can get help for that.”

“What kind of help?”

“Ambrosia- adjacent help,” he says in a whisper.

Chiyo’s eyes widen again.

“Well…”

She doesn’t know why Katsuki is here, why he decided to return or even how he made it back. She doesn’t know why the boy is this adamant on working under her instead of under the proper heroes or why he doesn’t want anyone to know he’s doing it in the first place. What Chiyo does know is that their situation of dead and injured is bad, and it’ll only get worse and worse in the coming days.
Under those circumstances, she’s not about to say no to help.

A mile away, three hours earlier.

The room is so heated they barely notice it when Izuku steps in with Shouto and Uraraka at his side. They tick around the door without making a fuss, listening as the various parties in here fight about something or the other.

“We’re sitting ducks,” a man Izuku doesn’t recognize keeps insiting. The HPSC badge around his neck is giveaway enough. “We can’t just wait here and twiddle our thumbs until they make the first move, again, and descimate our forces, again.”

“Easy for you to say,” Vlad King interrupts. “You’re not the one who’ll be sticking his neck out.”

“Oh, I’m sorry for asking the heroes to be heroes,” the man repeats. “You signed up for this.”

“So you let us do our jobs our way—”

“Because that worked out so well this time—”

“I’d like to remind you the false tip for when the league would attack came from your side—”

Izuku observes pointedly as Hawks, looking worse for the wear and with no wings in sight, stiffens. Maybe Kacchan is right.

As a bunch of arguing breaks out All Might, also particularly gaunt and fragile, finally notes Izuku’s presence in the room. His dark eyes widen, and he almost gives them away before Izuku makes a shushing gesture with his hand.

The entire room flinches as Nighteye bangs on the table with one of his stamps. Izuku is eerily reminded of the meeting post-Hassaikai raid.

“We will not get anywhere if we keep arguing like children,” he says forcefully.

“You’ve got some gall,” the HPSC commissioner continues to challenge. “If your quirk can’t predict this much, what are you even good for?”

Izuku jolts. “That’s not how Sir’s quirk works,” he blurts out, indignant. “He can’t just predict some kind of general future. He needs to have looked into specific ones of specific people.” And even that poses a risk because once you know your future and once you know it’s terrible, you’ll lose it trying to avoid it. “Were any of you willing to volunteer for that?”

No one responds. Some of the people in the council have stood at alarm. Others are staring at Izuku like he’s grown a second head. He spots some empty seats at the table and makes his way there. If you can't beat them, join them.

“I’m sorry, and where did you come from exactly?” Hawks asks. “You were MIA like,” he makes a show of checking his watch. “An hour ago.” He turns to the rest of the table. “Are we just going to accept this?”

“We’re at war,” Endeavor says, though he looks like he’s having a hard time not surging up and doing something crazy like — like hugging Shouto, which is scarier to think about than all the people in this room attacking them.

“Exactly, which is why they could be clones, or League members in disguise, or—”

Shouto blinks, ices half the room, and fills the other half with a scorching red fire in a split second.

“That means nothing,” Hawks says, sweating from the brief surge of heat. “All for One could’ve captured them. Stolen their quirks. Handed them to someone else.”

“He can’t do that,” Izuku says. Internally, he’s shaking, but now’s the time to be strong. He throws a glance at All Might, with his decision made. “Not to me, at least.”

“And why not?” the HPSC commissioner challenges, like Izuku’s some stupid kid he’s never seen before in his life. From the corner of his eye, he watches Sir watch his mentor.

“He can’t take my quirk.” Izuku activates Black Whip. “Because he’s the one that made it.”

It takes them something of an hour to explain the technicalities of One for All, most of it eaten up by having to dissuade a bunch of arguments that make Izuku feel like he’s in middle school all over again. No, they couldn’t have just transferred One for All to the next strongest guy, that guy would’ve blown up from the inside out due to the surplus of power. Yes, Izuku had been only a quirkless teenager when he got the power, but that was how All Might’s story had started as well. No, they can’t just take the power from Izuku now and transfer it to a more proven hero, like Endeavor. It’s already reached Singularity and Izuku will have to be it’s final bearer. No, just because he has this quirk doesn’t make him immune to everything All for One can do, that’s the exact thought that killed Nana Shimura and all their predecessors. No, they can’t have the student with the copy quirk copy it, he’d just get the original version without all the exponentials of power. No, they can’t give All for One One for All in its singularity form to make him blown up from the inside, the transfer needs to be consensual from both ends, and All for One may be the only person capable of handling One for All in this form, which means there’s a very real chance trying that gamble could end with them at a loss of their greatest weapon and their enemy to the power of ten stronger…

“My heard hurts, Ninth,” Banjo complains, fazing his fingers in and out of the HPSC commissioner’s skull. “Must be nice to have nothing in here— ”

“So,” Izuku summarizes, willing the vestiges away. “I can deal with Shigaraki.” His whole existence is basically intended to deal with

Shigaraki. “But he’s not the only one part of their forces. Instead of bickering among each other, we need to come up with a plan of attack.”

“And All for One?”

“Shigaraki is All for One,” Izuku says. “That’s the whole reason he’s getting upgraded in the first place. To inherit the quirk.”

“Except—”

“I— We have reason to believe otherwise,” Hawks cuts in.

“How so?”

“There’s been discussion around the upper echelons of the League, that All for One doesn’t intend to step out of his top dog position so easily.”

“And what does that mean?” Izuku asks, as impatient as he is worried. For some reason, his mind floats to Kacchan.

“I don’t know details, nobody does,” Hawks continues. “But it’s possible they’ve figured out a way to multiply the quirk.”

“…Meaning?”

“Shigaraki and All for One could both end up having it.”

That’s bad. That’s really bad. Izuku has grown exponentially more powerful since he inherited this quirk as a skinny little kid, but he’s not sure with a hundred percent certainty he can handle one All for One, never mind two. What could they do to stop this? How can they make sure—

“Mic, you said Bakugou was here?” Hawks asks.

Izuku startles. “What does Kacchan have to do with this—”

“Yes. I ran into him with…” Mic-sensei pauses like he doesn’t want to talk about Aizawa and Midnight-sensei. If Izuku was stressing before, he’s on the verge of losing it now. “He even had the girl from the Hassaikai with him. Eri.”
The table breaks out into whispers.

“She can rewind time, can’t she?”

“She could rewind All Might back into his full power.”

“She could fix all of our injured. ”

“Can’t we use her DNA to make the quirk erasing bullets? The League can’t do anything to us if they’re quirkless.”

“Bakugou,” Hawks’s voice cuts to the chatter. “He’s dealt with All for One before. He’s stopped All for One before. He’s taken quirks off people before.”

“What does that—”

“The Hassaikai raid,” Hawks fills in. “Overhaul didn’t end up the way he did because of the heroes.”

“That’s classified information—” Nighteye grits out, but Hawks ignores him.

“It was Bakugou who ripped his quirk away.”

“How does that even work?!”

“That’s crazy!”

“Why weren’t we notified of this before?!”

“If anyone has a solution for this, it’s going to be Bakugou. He’s immortal. I’m eighty percent sure of this. If we could just get our hands on him and—”

“That’s enough,” Nighteye demands. Izuku’s eyes are flashing, and he only realizes his quirk is on the verge of going haywire when he notes how quiet the rest of the room has become.

“Young Midoriya…” All Might coaxes. Izuku tries to take a deep breath in.

“Kacchan isn’t immortal,” he says, though he’s really not sure of the truth of it. “He’s, well— it’s complicated.”

That’s not the answer this council wants to hear.

“Can this Bakugou help us or not?” Endeavor demands.

“He’s— he can—” He is helping. “Just not— not in this way.”

“And why is that?”

Izuku scrambles for justification. “Because he’s— he’s a civilian. All for One broke his quirk, back in Kamino. It doesn’t work like it used to. He’s not trained as a hero. He’s not trained for anything. And Eri-chan is a child—”

“You think the villains are cutting civilians and kids slack, Midoriya?” Vlad King cuts in. “I get that they’re not prepared for this the way we are, but they’re caught up in it all the same. They’ve got targets on their backs, especially with their abilities, if what I’m hearing here is true. So they can either watch the world burn down or help us put the fire out. I know which option any normal human would prefer.”

“Besides, Bakugou isn’t a normal civilian. He hasn’t been a normal civilian for a long time. I don’t understand why he’s so adverse to doing this,” Hawks says. Izuku has a feeling there’s some personal history there between him and Kacchan no one else is privy to. “I don’t understand him.”

“He was hurt,” Izuku says. “They’ve done things to him that were—”

“What? Terrible? Welcome to the club! Look around you, Midoriya. Do you think the League cuddled with the rest of us? Gave us flowers?”

It’s a bitter truth. All the heroes are looking worse for wear. A large chunk of Endeavor’s body is wrapped in thick bandages that peek from beneath his clothing. Hawks’ wings are gone and his voice is scratchy, throat bruised. Izuku’s teachers are littered with wounds, his mentor’s form is saggy and sallow...

“We have to burn our dead tomorrow because there’s no space to bury them.” Izuku flinches. “The League have been trying to kill you and your entire class since you stepped foot in this school. Evil doesn’t discriminate. We’ve all been hurt. We’ve all been traumatized. None of us are having fucking fun. Despite that, you don’t see us running away from our responsibilities—”

Izuku is about to say something unspeakable before Ochako beats him to the chase. Her hand on his shoulder is soft, comforting.

“What I don’t understand,” Uraraka says, “is why we’re mooching those responsibilities onto Bakugou.”

“That’s not—”

“It is though. Okay, so you have this vague idea he might somehow be able to magically solve this, but it’s only a possibility, right? It’s not like you have any proof he can do anything. It’s conjecture.”

“He’s survived an encounter with All for One before and—”

“So has Best Jeanist,” Uraraka points out, “—and everyone who was part of the Kamino raid, including me. So why aren’t you throwing anyone else to the wolves?”

All the heroes are watching her intently. “I know we’re all tired and I know we all wish there was a simple way to solve this, but there isn’t. The purpose of this meeting is to figure out the complexities like adults, and since the last time I was here this morning, none of you have made any practical progress. We don’t need a big groundbreaking answer for everything. We need a whole bunch of little answers. We should start working on that, ask Katsuki about all of this later if you really want to, and figure out a plan to save everyone.”

“She’s right,” Ryukuu says. “We’ve been getting nowhere all day.”

“We should be focusing on what we can do instead of what we can’t.”

As murmurs of ascent follow, Izuku looks to Uraraka gratefully, mouths a soft, “Thank you.” She’s always had a concise and determined way to get through to people Izuku envies.

“What do you mean, ask Bakugou about this later? Is he here?”

Izuku grips Uraraka’s hand, squeezes to signal her to refrain from answering with a pleading look. Her lips press shut.

“We get it, Hawks, you’re in love with Bakugou. Can we please get back to work now?”

Izuku breathes a sigh of relief as the discussion finally starts getting productive.

“I’m booooooored here, Kacchan.”

Katsuki piles the vials of blood into the cupboard connected to the charmed bag, arranging them neatly so as many as possible fit. He’s made sure to save a bunch of their supply here, for emergencies, but a good bit of it will have to be coming with. Recovery hag was hiding a

lot more seriously injured people than she let on. He also grabs other supplies that might come in handy, like slightly illegal calming drugs and pain-killers.

Katsuki doesn't think the law matters anymore. Would be stupid if it did.

Satsu circles Eri, begs for morsels of attention by curling his massive tail. The kid pays him zero mind.

"You can't just leave me here, stuck, all alone."

"You're not alone," he says, checking the seal of the vials with Blue's blood. For all her whining, her quirk's not shabby at all in situations like these. "Satsu's here with you."

"Satsu doesn't talk!" Eri complains. The cat looks mildly offended by that. Purrs and steps out. Katsuki steals a glance outside, at the nice view of the island, at the starry sky. Feels the fresh breeze, unmarred by the scent of disinfectant and dust and death."I've already rung up Riko-san and Ibara-chan and Fuyumi-sensei like a million times. They're all at shelters, with other people, not stranded alone in this, this shitty place like me—"

"Eri," Katsuki says forcefully, regretting it the instant their eyes meet. "I'm not doing this because I want to, kid," he says. "You don't know how dangerous it is out there."

"Bullshit. I lived with Chisaki for five years."

"And once these people find out what you can do, they'll exploit you just like he did," Katsuki snaps.

"So?" she challenges, stomping up to him. "I want to help. I know I can help."

"No, you don't. You're fucking five—"

"Seven!"

"— the hero's bullshit isn't your responsibility."

"The League hurt you and you are my responsibility."

Katsuki laughs.

"Don't fucking laugh at me," Eri says, grabbing the collar of his hood

with fire in her eyes. “I— I promised granny. Are you gonna fucking laugh at that?!”

Fuck. Katsuki really did raise this kid.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t let them have you.”

“So just let me stick around,” Eri suggests. “Let me do little stuff. Something. I’m losing my fucking mind here Kacchan.”

“Who taught you to speak like that, huh?” Katsuki shoves her away playfully.

“You did.”

“Little shit.”

He breathes in, closes the now full cupboard with a thunk. The kid has a point. As safe as the island is, locking her up on it for days, potentially weeks on end is bound to end terribly.

“Fine,” he says. “You can come with. Hang around where it’s safe. On one condition though.”

“What?”

“No using your quirk.”

“But—”

“No buts. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, kid, but that thing’s overpowered as hell and you’re not strong enough or good enough with it yet to use it to the degree they’re going to want from you.” Eri’s improved her close control a lot, but her stores aren’t that great. On one fully charged horn she’s barely got the juice to rewind a couple of plants. Her quirk really shines power wise when it’s out of control, and that’s not exactly ideal when you’re working with a human life.

“Kacchan—”

“This is non-negotiable. Take it or leave it.”

She pretends to think about it, but Katsuki knows she’s got her. “Okay,” she says, and runs into the next room. “Thank you thank you thank you thank you! I’ll pack my bag right now—”

Katsuki follows her, braces himself on the frame of the door.

“You’re coming tomorrow.”

He has to laugh as he walks up to him and tries to punch him in the stomach. Katsuki’s proud to say it hurts a heck of a lot more than it did a couple of months ago. His kid’s growing up fast.

“That’s what you get for being a bitch!”

“Nothing personal.” All he needs to do now is deliver the vials to recovery girl. He’s planning on sleeping here tonight anyway. He doesn’t trust UA as far as he can throw it. “I’ll be back in an hour or two, probably. Follow me and I’m leaving you here for good, you hear.”

“Fuck you!”

He steps through the portal and zips it shut.

The halls of the central infirmary bay are eerie. Gym Beta is the temporary medical wing, the nice one meant to deal with emergencies and soothe the refugees. Over here is where they’ve got the real tough cases, the people on life support, the people in comas, the people recovering from or awaiting surgery. Katsuki makes a point not to look into the rooms as they roll by, unwilling to admit he’s scared of what, or worse yet, who he might find, strapped to a bed and on their last breath. If you ignore the shitty circumstances, this place hasn’t changed one bit since some three years ago. It’s still the same disgusting teal color, the tiles still squeak in the same places, the light that’s been broken since Katsuki first stepped foot here is still flashing, hanging on for dear life. He steals a glance at painfully familiar burgundy doors. Was it not in one of these rooms that his life changed forever?

All that, and yet so many things have stayed identical. His parents, Inko, Deku, Round Face, UA.

His chest twists.

Why the hell is Recovery Hag’s office so far away from the entrance?

He rounds a corner and the last thing he hears before his vision goes black is a loud thunk.

Katsuki wakes up in a locked, windowless room.

Chapter End Notes

1) been a bit, hasn't it? :D
2) around the time i posted for the final time some three years ago now real life responsibilities were really picking up, i was struggling to find motivation and inspiration to write, and started losing interest in the manga in part thanks to the katsuki drought. long story short, a lot of changes happened in my life which meant writing and this fic had to go on the backburner. despite that, i never turned AO3 notifications to my email off, which means I was still getting all your guys' kudos, and comments, and well wishes and beautiful words. thank you so much to all the people that stuck with this story, to all the people who started reading later despite the lack of updates, to all the people who've been encouraging me throughout the years. the comments made me realise how precious my silly little story has become to a lot of people and i found it very sad that it was left off so close to the end so... here i am
3) the ending is still going to be the planned 4-5 chapters, i might need to rush some things and i'm not sure it'll be up to par for the previous chapters, since i'm very rusty on writing, despite my age it's not improved since i started this nearly 5 years ago now, and i no longer remember the little details i put into the story that were supposed to tie up beautifully into the ending. i do remember my general idea for the ending, however, so you'll have to bear with it.
4) disclamer this is utterly non canon compliant. since katsuki's "death" in light fades to rain i havent kept up with the manga and know only basic things, like that fact that katsuki came back. ive also read the final chapter, but that's it, so take the endings that will follow with a grain of salt.
5) this chapter probably makes no sense but, part of me is just happy to be writing again
6) thanks so much for all the love, friends <3
7) I once again apologize for all the continuity errors

Chapter 37: Intermission: Fire

Chapter Summary

Firelit conversations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dabi doesn't care about these people. Dabi has never cared about these people.

And yet, as Toga Himiko's childhood home is engulfed in dark blue flames, he can't help but feel a sense of lightness.

All of this had started yesterday, when Dabi had caught the crazy bitch prancing through the mansion they were squatting in while he lounged on the couch. Despite how massive of a win the UA raid had been for the League (they'd pulled off what was in essence a Coup d'Etat, and one so insane international powers had basically abandoned Japan to fend for itself, terrified of what League retribution could mean inside their own borders), Dabi hadn't even bothered to pretend to be basking in the same glory. The country was in collapse, hundreds of heroes were dead or injured, civilians were pissing themselves, public structures had ceased to exist. This was Spinner's wet dream. Shigaraki would be cackling with glee when he woke up. They'd completed their mission and then some. Hell, they'd released thousands of deadly convicts from Tartarus, among them their precious Sensei, all of whom were now out in the streets, wreaking havoc. This was great. This was fantastic.

This was the last thing Dabi gave a single damn about.

What good was mass destruction if his horrendous excuse of a family wasn't at the crux of it?

He'd had it all planned out, the grand reveal. He'd recorded a dramatic video that would smear Endeavor's good image irreversibly, with a dabble of Hawks bashing on the side, more than deserved considering the wannabe spy had ended up killing Twice during the battle, far more villainous and backstabby a move than anyone in the League had shown themselves capable of thus far. At least they were assholes to your face. Most of them, that is.

Not that Dabi missed Twice. Like he said, he didn't give a rat's ass about any of these guys. Not a single one.

Regardless, he'd done all the necessary prep. For something of a decade, he'd cared about one thing and one thing only. His supposed love of Stain, his work for the League, all of it had been a front for his singular final goal: destroying his family once and for all. Since Dabi had been born, he'd been dreaming about the look on Shouto's face, on Endeavor's face, hell, on mom's face, when they realized the monster in front of them was one of their own making, and not some faceless gutter rat they could put behind bars guilt-free. The broadcast, the instant bleach, everything was prepared, and like usual, perfect little Shouto had thrown a wrench in his plans by calling Dabi that horrible name as soon as their eyes had met.

Touya Touya Touya Touya, Shouto wouldn't stop using it. Hell, he'd sometimes switch to full-on brother, like he gave a fuck or something, like they knew each other like that or something. It made T— Dabi's skin crawl and curl. All the finesse he'd planned on exercising had been thrown out the window as he'd immediately seen red and blasted Shouto on first contact. The little shit had *ruined* his surprise. All this time, Dabi had thought himself a chess grandmaster when they'd been actually playing checkers.

Oh well. Those third-degree burns hurt all the same.

It grated on his nerves that Shouto and seemingly their entire merry family had known all this time -- that they thought this was salvageable, that they wanted to save him. He could vomit. They didn't understand a thing. Ten, fifteen years later, they were still as clueless as they'd been when Touya had been a child.

And so, when Toga revealed her intention of visiting her childhood home, as a fellow subscriber of the *fuck your family* club, tagging along to be the fuse of its destruction was the least Dabi could do.

Dabi is leaning upside down from a windowsill of the house adjacent, the heat of the flames licking at his face. Himiko stares at the massive pyre that has become her past, at the way the fire stretches from its foundation to its roof. The ugly vandalism all over the wall is melting away in the heat; the entire shell of the house is disintegrating — soon, there will be nothing left of it but a giant husk, if that.

Toga spent a good twenty minutes inside before Dabi caught up with her. Dabi has no clue what she did and frankly doesn't want to have

one. It had been fascinating to read all the angered scribbles of bloodsuckers and scum. He's never bothered to learn Toga's backstory. That was more Twice's game.

But now that Jin's gone, someone has to fill in the gap.

Or something.

Dabi can fill it in different ways.

"Why would you do that?" Himiko asks, unable to peel her eyes away from the massive fireball even as it gets big enough to put her in danger.

"Why live if we can't have fun?" he retorts, rolling off the windowsill and landing masterfully on his legs.

"This was nice of you, though," Toga says, her cheeks flushed from elation and maybe the adrenaline of being so close to the fire.

"I'm only nice if it makes Endeavor suffer more," T—Dabi says simply, digs into his pocket for the vial of blood, and throws it at her. Her expression zeroes in on it.

"It's the blood of someone you really love," he says. "Let's keep the sad man's parade going."

Dabi may not care about these people, but he does need them.

He needs them to do the rest of the dirty work while he burns his family to a crisp, one member at a time.

"Do I know where Kacchan is?" Fuyumi repeats, keeping her voice low and glancing nervously at the two Bakugous in the corner of their tent. She'd had to completely go outside when Eri had called previously, but now that it was storming, that was basically impossible. "No, why would I?" Should she know? She knows Shouto is back, along with that friend of his, Midoriya, but they'd not gotten any details besides that; apparently, the boys were busy with some war council situation dad was also involved in. She also knows the Bakugous have been screaming up a storm regarding Katsuki and his supposed presence here, but considering Katsuki has gone through all this trouble all these years to keep himself concealed from them, she doesn't think he would appreciate her tattling now.

“He came to UA with a portal,” Eri explains. She sounds an odd mix of stressed and annoyed. Fuyumi doesn’t know what to make of. “Said he would be back in a few hours.”

“And? Is he not?” The network is jittery, Eri’s voice comes across scratchy and marred by interference.

“No.”

Fuyumi gulps, glances at the Bakugous again.

“Maybe he’s gotten held up here?” she suggests, not really believing it herself.

“All he had to do was deliver something. He said two hours max, and it's already been three. What if he got kiddynapped again, Sensei? He doesn’t tell me anything. He doesn’t let me do anything. And now he just disappears and leaves me here all alone like I’m— like I’m some baby!”

Fuyumi winces. “Sweetheart. It’s dangerous for you here.”

“But not for you? Not for Kacchan?”

“For all of us,” Fuyumi corrects. “But we’re adults.”

“Oh fuck off,” Eri says, and Fuyumi almost gets whiplash. “Did you know Kacchan used to go to UA?” she asks, changing the subject altogether.

“Yes…?” Fuyumi says, confused.

“And why didn’t you say anything? Even though you both know I love UA?”

I didn’t try to hide it almost slips out of her mouth before she realizes it’s a lie. Because, in fact, she had gone through the trouble of blocking Katsuki’s name from the school’s computer. “Katsuki didn’t want you knowing,” she opts for.

“Why?”

“It’s complicat—”

Eri hangs up. She legitimately hangs up. Fuyumi has to pull the phone away from her face and blink at it, double and triple check that this is reality. Sure, a lot of Katsuki’s mannerisms have rubbed off on her

after all this time, and she expects a lot more swearing out of Eri than out of your average eight-year-old, but she's not straight-up rude, never rude.

Fuyumi runs her hand through her hair. She tries to call Eri back, but the phone just rings with no response.

What the hell is going on here?

Mirai can't help but feel a little uncomfortable as he watches Hawks drag Bakugou's limp form into the storage room. It's dark and dingy, windowless, with a distinct scent of must. Bakugou's appearance is unassuming enough. He's a boy, average height, very lean, translucent, sickly skin and washed-out hair. The scars around his eyes are eerie, and even in unconsciousness, his face seems scrunched up uncomfortably.

Keigo props the kid up against the wall, pats his cheek a few times to check that he's knocked out.

"And you're sure he can help us?" Mirai asks for the nth time, regarding the whole setup with not little hesitance. He'd known Keigo wouldn't let Bakugou's presence here slide from the moment his colleague had started larping on about him, and Mirai would be lying if he claimed not to be intrigued.

Since his quirk had manifested at five years old and he'd been shown in great detail how his mother would die, Mirai had lived his life deeply terrified of the inevitable. Not few times had he been told his quirk was "overpowered" often by wide-eyed first or second year hero students with big dreams and little practical experience. *Seeing the future?* they would go. *You know everything your opponents will do before they even bother to do it! What's the point of fighting you at all? It's an automatic loss!*

They failed to factor in that Foresight also takes into account its own existence. Whenever a future was changeable, Mirai would also see himself changing it. That meant all he needed to do was act exactly as his vision self for the best possible outcome. That meant that, when the future showed him no good outcomes at all, this terrible fate was sure to come regardless of how hard Mirai fought against it. Visions of death, loss, destruction, Mirai had learned early on that those were not futures he could prevent, or he never would have been shown them at all. His quirk was as much a blessing as it was a ticking time bomb, a death sentence. He worked hard to hone his skills, tried to

limit himself to looking only at the near future, which was more often than not preventable. This made him crucial for battle plans, short-term strategies, and raid planning while allowing him to stay blissfully ignorant of the often gruesome and horrifying fates of his colleagues if he looked far enough. You could not cheat death. The only sure thing about the future was its eventual end. For a long time, he'd been utterly and irrevocably convinced of it.

Then the Hassaikai raid happened. He met Izuku Midoriya, who put the first chip in his conviction, they learned about Eri and the way her quirk worked, which cracked the glass in wide spiderwebs, and then finally Bakugou, who shattered everything he'd ever believed to pieces.

Before the start of the raid, Mirai had done something he'd forbidden himself from doing since he'd understood the nature of his quirk.

He'd looked into his own future.

Mirai had gone into the raid knowing he was meant to die.

Only he hadn't died, and Mirio hadn't lost his quirk, and Midoriya hadn't been destroyed by Overhaul either; no, the entire basement had been blown to smithereens by an outside force that seemed to defy even the logic of Mirai's omniscient quirk. Despite how big a role Bakugou's presence had ended up playing in the raid, Mirai's quirk had failed to detect a single trace of it. For the first time in his life, he'd been shown a timeline entirely at odds with what had actually happened, and this without him as the one consciously making changes in hopes of a better future.

As far as his quirk was concerned, Bakugou didn't exist at all.

That was a problem, but it was also a possibility.

It meant Mirai's quirk was fallible. It meant the terrible futures he worked so hard to avoid seeing weren't set in stone.

It meant someone could break them.

Thus far, his quirk had only failed when three people were involved. One was, much to his initial annoyance, Midoriya Izuku.

The others were Bakugou and Eri.

He has access to the former. The latter two are both… works in

progress.

“Is this really the only way?” he asks as Hawks takes most of Bakugou’s belongings off his person. The boy is completely boneless, as expected from the tranquilizer needle they used to knock him out. The rise and fall of his chest is minimal.

Though Mirai wants to use Bakugou as much as the next guy (they’re way past the state of niceties, they’re at war, desperate times call for desperate measures), he’s still a hero, and what they’re doing isn’t exactly the picture of heroic.

“Unfortunately,” says Hawks as he stuffs all of Bakugou’s things into a bag without paying them much thought. “I’ve spoken to him before on various occasions, presented him with several plans. He’s rejected every single one. He insists this isn’t his job anymore.”

“Perhaps he has a point,” Mirai says, growing more and more uncomfortable the longer he stares at Bakugou’s sleeping form.

“None of us *want* this job,” Hawks says, sighing. That’s a serious bit of projection Mirai doesn’t feel like calling out. “It’s pretty damn hard to love it after seeing what we’ve seen. But we still fight.” He stands, patting his pants free of wrinkles and stepping away from the boy. There’s something inexplicable on his face. “We don’t run.”

“What we’re doing will only make him more uncooperative,” Mirai points out.

“It’ll make him mad,” Hawks counters, a wonky smile stretching his lips. “It’ll make him care.”

Mirai hums. “And Eri?”

“He’s convinced himself he’s her dad or something,” Hawks says. “I’m sure he knows where she is. Give him a few hours to wake up, and we’ll get it out of him.”

Mirai walks deeper into the room, stands next to where Hawks is standing at Bakugou’s feet. The urge to touch him and see his future makes Mirai’s fingers itch.

“What is it that he can do, exactly?” He has a vague idea from Overhaul’s case files, but the concept of someone being able to see this so-called *quirk plane* and not only visualize but also touch the quirk energy they can barely measure is difficult for Mirai to wrap his head

around.

“Destroy quirks from the inside out,” Hawks says. “And come back from the dead,” he adds casually.

Mirai’s world feels as though it’s tilting. No wonder his quirk fails when this boy is around. He defies the very law that governs it. “How?”

“He claims it’s because during his encounter with All for One, his soul was detached from the physical plane and thrown into the quirk one, with only the flimsy bridge of his quirk factor holding things together. His body is a puppet, remote-controlled from an entirely separate dimension. As long as his consciousness can stay latched onto it, how beat up it gets doesn’t really matter.”

Some part of Mirai feels like he’s right back at the round table of his office, regrouping after the disaster that had been the Hassaikai mission. *The articles said All For One himself claimed to have killed him. How does a kid even go up against that?* He swallows dry.

“Doesn’t that mean he’s already dead, in a way?”

Mirai can’t quite place the emotion on Keigo’s face. It’s a somber sort of sadness, like he pities Bakugou’s situation, which is a little senseless considering they are the ones actively holding him captive.

“I think he’s been dead for a long time.”

Mirai shivers. Hawks swings the bag of belongings haphazardly. “I’ll leave this in the next room, yeah?” he says. “Lock the door when you leave. He should wake up in about—” He checks his watch. “— three or four hours. We can check up on him then.”

Mirai nods, waits until he can no longer hear Hawk’s footsteps before taking off his glove.

He breathes in.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Eri says when Satsu stares at her with a judgmental expression after she’s thrown away her phone in frustration. “All these grown-ups are so useless. They can’t get anything done.”

Satsu continues to stare as Eri angrily packs her bag, picking up the

very phone she just threw. She doesn't even have the one granny gifted her that can easily fit all her supplies; no, she has to use her clunky school backpack. This thing doesn't even have knife holsters. Honestly, it's a fucking disgrace.

She throws her supplies inside, finds her nice coat, and waterproof shoes.

They don't want to let her in on what's going on? Fine. She'll let herself in.

Having prepared everything, the last thing she needs before going on her merry way is her hood, one of the ones Kacchan made for her. The same one Satsu is currently using as a chew toy.

"Can I have that?" she asks not very nicely, chasing after him. He's speedy enough that he's next to impossible to catch as he slinks from piece of furniture to piece of furniture despite his massive size. "Please, come on, I need it—"

He ignores her, perched himself up atop their highest cupboard, barely fitting in the little gap between its top and the wall. Eri has no hope of ever getting up there short of scaling the cupboard's slatted door.

That's exactly what she does. "I need it," she repeats, getting more desperate. She hears the cupboard creak against her weight and gives up climbing instinctively, falling onto the floor with a thud. In the meantime, Satsu has hopped off his perch, now plopping himself up on the kotatsu and summoning this thick gray cloud on his trail. It settles above Eri's head, dark and quite literally thundering.

"Come on," she continues to complain, but when she tries to reach for him again, the cloud zaps her, jerking her onto the floor. She finally takes that moment of confusion to stare at Satsu's big eyes and realizes the furball whore has been trying to get her to calm down this entire time.

And she's been treating him like dirt on the side of the road.

Eri softens, suddenly feeling guilty. It's as though these last few days have brought all the ugly feelings she'd done her best to bury since escaping Chisaki's hold bubbling back to the surface. Anger, frustration, sadness, betrayal.

Fear.

She needs to get her feelings in order. Kacchan always says to do like he says, not like he does, and right now she's doing a bit too much like he does.

Stupid Kacchan.

"What if he's in trouble, Satsu?"

Their cat quirks his head, purring.

"Those other people there, they don't really care about him. They're—they're going to hurt him. And the only reason they found out where we were at all was because I wanted to go to the sports festival. So I have to help, right?"

Satsu purrs again, stepping off the table to circle her. Eri follows him with her gaze as he struts up to the cupboard she'd been trying to climb and paws at it — specifically at its bottom-most storage area.

The magic cupboard.

The one directly connected to her magic purse.

"Satsu, you're a genius!" Eri says and rushes to throw the cupboard's sliding door open. All the vials Kacchan set inside are still there in the exact same alignment Kacchan had left them in, which is a huge red flag. The whole point of Kacchan going back to UA was to deliver this blood — if it's still here, it means they either didn't use it, or Kacchan never made it to his destination…

Eri shivers.

"Do you think I can fit through?" She shoves the vials to the side, plants herself into the cupboard, and stares up at the fabric opening. Its drawstrings are pulled shut. The purse is quite wide at the mouth. Granny made it so in order to have flexibility and fit large things inside, and because linking portals was easier when the in and out were of similar sizes. Quite wide doesn't mean a full-on human wide, though, and Eri is no longer as small as she used to be some years ago. "What happens if I rip it?"

Would the portal cut her in half? Teleport half of her inside the cupboard? Spit her out?

Satsu gives her no time to contemplate that as he zips from outside the cupboard into her lap, then through the portal, stretching open the

mouth of the purse. She can now see into what appears to be a classroom ceiling through a gaping hole, and the whole spontaneity of the move leaves her so startled that she rushes to follow Satsu without overthinking it.

Fitting through is much more difficult for her than her liquid cat. She gets her head across before her shoulders get stuck, and the sensation of spending so long on the borderline between portals is a stomach-sinking one. After a bit of useless struggling Satsu is patting her head back inside, and she realizes he's trying to get her to use a different tactic for fitting through, one that will make her overall diameter smaller. So Eri puts her arms through first, uses that leverage to gently shimmy the opening downwards until it reaches her legs and she can easily step out. She's dizzy and a little queasy, but she's here, so she quickly pulls the drawstring of the purse tightly shut so as not to damage the portal seal further and takes a look at her surroundings.

As she suspected, it's immediately clear that something is wrong. This purse was supposed to be on Kacchan, for starters. Instead, it's been thrown onto the teacher's desk in this empty classroom. The large windows give her a view of the UA campus (she has to take a second to catch her breath when she notices how half of the stadium is missing, the edges of what's left shredded to bits — after all, it was a mere few days ago that she and Suzu-chan and Kacchan were sitting in it) dotted with the few lights of what must be the dorms and a couple of tents. The line of the horizon is broken by the UA wall, almost mountainous in its height.

It 's not safe out here for you.

Eri blinks the thought away. Safety is a fairly new thing for her anyway.

The next red flag is that the purse is not the only thing on the table. In fact, Eri finds pretty much all of Kacchan's belongings right beside it. His knives, one of his favorite lighters, even the All Might trading card he pretends not to carry around, they've all been shoved into this bag like they were taken off Kacchan in a hurry.

Weird.

"Don't you think this is weird?"

She could swear Satsu nods, makes his way towards the door carefully, elegantly. He pushes it open, checking that the coast is clear. Eri grabs the bag of Kacchan's things and follows him into the

hallway. 2-A says the sign above them, and the rest of the hall is also lined with your typical classroom signs.

They're in UA, she realizes. Like, the building proper. The school itself.

But wasn't Kacchan working in the medical wing with Recovery Girl? She'd watched one of those "A day in my life at UA" videos with Suzu-chan once, and she knows for a fact that the infirmary and classes are quite far apart, the former being much closer to the gyms where injuries are likeliest to happen.

This is weird. All of it fucking weird.

The hallway is quiet, deathly so, and the lights are low like they need to skimp on electricity. Opposite her is another classroom, empty, next to that a bathroom with its door thrown open like someone rushed out of there in a hurry. On her side of the hallway, meanwhile, there's nothing but more classrooms, an unlabeled room that's probably storage, and a few labs.

This place is useless. There's no one here. It's so empty it's giving Eri the heebie-jeebies.

"Let's get out of here, boy," she whispers to Satsu, who graciously offers himself up to be her scout and begins to lead them away from this creepy hallway towards what the navigation signs on the walls tell her should be the stairwells.

She'll look for the infirmary wing, she decides. Or maybe one of the tents where Fuyumi-sensei might be. Maybe she's found Kacchan by now. Contacted him or something.

The more she walks the abandoned halls, the less she can shake her sinking feeling. It's much brighter than Chisaki's basement, this place. It actually has windows, and the walls aren't dingy and dark and smelly; they're a pleasant shade of white. But the low lighting, and the singe marks marring some rooms, and the breeze flowing in weird directions, like someone has blown holes in the building or something — they're tripping her up.

Where are all the people? There's so much space here. Why aren't they using this as a shelter?

Then again, most of the classroom doors are locked, and sometimes she'll hear creaking and beeping noises from their insides that make

her flinch. Maybe they've turned this place into a factory. Maybe they're building stuff.

"I don't like this, Satsu," she says, almost yelping as she reaches an intersection and freezes, throwing herself against the wall to avoid being seen by whoever's heading in this direction.

"—honestly." It's a vaguely familiar voice, but Eri can't place it. "How long is this meeting even going to take? We've been at it for hours."

"Duh, that's what happens when you constantly have new people who need to be debriefed joining in." This voice she doesn't recognize at all, but it sounds like a girl. They're in the hallway perpendicular to her, three sets of footsteps, and they're getting closer and closer to the intersection. Eri hugs Satsu tightly, shushes him as he squirms against her grip like he can do noob spy work like this without the need for handholding.

"It's not a meeting, it's a plenary session at this point," and there's the third voice.

"Okay, thesaurus, I'm impressed you know that word."

"Fuck you."

"Don't you guys feel like the pros have completely given up?" the first voice says, ignoring the other two's bickering. They're right next to Eri now, and she catches a glimpse of red and pink and yellow before they've walked past her none the wiser. She chances it and peeks at their backs as they disappear down the hall. They're in simple UA uniforms, but their hairstyles almost ring a bell.

"Dude, I know, right? The doomer attitude in that room is a massive turn-off."

"Well, not exactly much to be excited about, is there?"

"Still," the first boy insists. "We're supposed to be the heroes."

Eri can no longer hear them clearly now, so she does something really impulsive. She follows them, waiting until they round a corner to dash after them. Satsu does not approve of this decision because he silently tries to zap her at every step, but she's made up her mind now, and for some reason, she's convinced these three are leading her to, if not the right, at least the interesting direction. They eventually reach a long hallway at the end of which are two double doors embedded

with glass windows. Library, a sign at their side informs her, and the lights behind those doors are, unlike the rest of the building's, bright and almost menacing. The three scan some sort of card and step inside, the door falling shut behind them. Once she's sure the coast is clear, Eri dashes toward this door, uses the glass slices in it to take a peek inside.

A lot of people is what she sees. A heck of a lot of people.

Heroes, her mind supplies.

It's not a difficult conclusion to reach. Figures like Cementos and Gang Orca are hard to mix up with anyone else.

Had these last few days not happened, Eri would be rushing in there and demanding help, stat. The heroes would help her; that was their job.

But these last few days have happened, and now she knows Kacchan left UA, hates UA so much he tried to completely erase its existence from his history by not telling her a single thing about it and his time here. Kacchan has a hero allergy. She remembers the first time she'd mentioned the Sports Festival to him. How scary that had been for both of them.

You 're not strong enough or good enough with it yet to use it to the degree they're going to want from you.

Using. Wanting. Her quirk as a weapon. The only other person who used that kind of language when it came to her was Chisaki and Eri did not like Chisaki.

She gulps and steps away from the door to find another direction to run towards.

Chiyo decides four hours is more than enough waiting for the boy to show up before she's barging into the heroes' so-called council. The room is crowded, its members having practically quadrupled since the morning. Aside from a few heroes sent out on night shifts, it's late enough now that most everyone has managed to regroup and everyone is looking for information, for answers, for what comes next.

Chiyo also wants answers. She's not stupid. She's got eyes and ears inside UA just as much as Nezu does. She knows the boy is far from normal even in their abnormal world, and she knows high powers

around here think him a useful tool. UA may have been breached once, but she knows for a fact Nezu wouldn't let it happen twice, which means whatever is holding up Bakugou is right here within these walls.

Unless the boy up and left on his own, which even from what little she knows of him, Chiyo finds highly unlikely. Especially not after he promised to help with valuable supplies.

"Where did you put him?" she demands, uncaring as her uncharacteristically barging in plunges the previously chattering room into silence. It reeks of sweat and too many people in here. It's pitiful.

"What?" Endeavor squeezes his eyes at her. He seems exhausted and annoyed.

"Lives are at stake here," Chiyo says, and she's not kidding either. If Bakugou was telling the truth, and he truly did have a store of Hiryo blood, it could be the difference between life and death, full recovery and permanent disability for a good deal of her more gravelly injured patients. She needs that medicine, and she needs it now.

"Right, I'm afraid to say we aren't really following," Best Jeanist throws in.

"Katsuki," she says finally, impatient, noting the way a lot of the Class 3-A kids in attendance stiffen. "Bakugou Katsuki. He was supposed to bring me some important medications, oh, some three hours ago? And he's yet to show up. Where is he?"

"Kacchan is gone—?"

"How are we supposed to know where this Bakugou is—?"

"Three hours ago? You sure took your time—"

"We don't have time for this—!"

"We didn't do anything to him—!"

"God, can we stop talking about this fucking Bakugou for two fucking seconds—!"

Chiyo hits the hardwood with her cane. The loud thwack silences the room once more. "Listen here, kids. I'm too old for your games. Just tell me where the boy is so I can be on my way."

“We don’t know where he—” Cementos starts to say gently, like Chiyo is senile or something.

“Nighteye’s bringing him,” Hawks interrupts. “Should be no more than five minutes.”

Though Hawks does his best to keep things casual, the statement does not go down well with the rest of the room.

“What the fuck do you mean—?”

“Why would Nighteye bring him—?”

“So we do know where he is—?”

“Who is Bakugou again—?”

“Guys, calm down,” Hawks tries to placate. “Sir and I just secured Bakugou to make sure he’d end up cooperating. It’s no big deal.”

“What do you mean by secured?” Midoriya is not asking particularly nicely. Black tendrils are already beginning to sprout from his back even as Todoroki places a grounding hand on his shoulder.

“Hold your horses, Deku—”

“Answer. The. Question,” Midoriya insists, Black Whip growing larger.

Hawks holds up his hands in faux nonchalance. “We just put him in time out for a bit, okay? He’s fine. We just wanted to be sure of his location so we could talk to him.”

“You were sure of his location,” Chiyo says. “He was in Gym Gamma. With me.”

“He’s a flight risk and you know it.”

“This is stupid—”

“He’s not your martyr, Hawks, drop this nonsense—”

“Calm down,” Hawks repeats. “Sir will be here with him in like two minutes. We didn’t hurt him. Just knocked him out for a bit. It’s not that serious.”

“Is this what you were spending your dinner break on—?”

“I thought Nighteye needed the bathroom—”

“War council my ass, there’s zero transparency here—”

“What the fuck do you mean knocked him out—?!”

The door creaks then, and it’s almost comical how the entire room whips their heads around to stare at it opening. Katsuki steps inside without paying much mind to the mass of people in here, looking down as though something about them will hurt his eyes. There’s blood dripping down his arm.

“Try harder next time,” he says, and drags a collapsed Nighteye into the room by the collar, nudging him a little with his foot to increase the distance between them.

Chiyo is far too old for this.

Katsuki would love to say the first thing he does is assess the situation and ingeniously figure out an escape plan, or immediately blast the room to high heavens, but the truth is far more pitiful than that.

The first thing he does is have a panic attack.

The room is too small, too dark, too cramped, too windowless and empty, and… he can’t really help it.

His heart is beating so fast it may as well pop out of his chest, and the only thing keeping his breath in order is how distracting the intense urge to vomit is getting. For fuck’s sake. You’d think he’d be used to this by now. Unlike every other time he’s woken up in some strange room after getting knocked out, he’s not even tied up, or blindfolded, or fuck if he knows, naked. There’s nothing even particularly torturous about this room, which the longer he spends inside of the more it looks like your regular old storage closet, simply emptied.

Katsuki presses himself to the wall he woke up against as though it’ll spit him right back out of here, pats himself for any belongings as he heaves, struggling for a lungful of shitty stale air.

It can’t be the League, can it? They’d never leave him this unrestricted. The stuff he’d had in his hands and pockets is gone, but whoever’s stripped him has not been very thorough, considering they’ve missed not one but two knife holsters. It’s almost like whoever put him here knows him, knows his exact weaknesses, and hopes his

past will lead to Katsuki taking himself out of commission. Last he remembers he was knocked out inside UA grounds too, and unless this place got breached twice in the span of a week (which, if so, these nerds might as well throw in the towel with or without Katsuki's help), it has to be one of the goody two-shoes wannabe heroes who's done this to him.

Katsuki has a sinking feeling he knows exactly who.

"Get it together, fucker," he mumbles to himself, exhaling harshly one last time before peeling himself from the wall and making for the only light source in the general vicinity, the small slip of illumination bleeding through the gap between the closed door and the floor. The thing is closed, of course, and it's one of those shitty automatic keycard doors UA has that doesn't even have a proper lock for Katsuki to pick.

That confirms one thing, at least. He's definitely still in UA.

The headache is already starting to build at the base of his skull.

Fan fucking tastic.

Fuck this shitty building and everyone in it.

They wanna play dirty? He'll play fucking dirty.

They've taken his lighters away, so he's got no run-of-the-mill ignition at his disposal, which would be a problem if Nitroglycerin weren't also a shock and friction explosive.

Katsuki doesn't even feel it as he pulls his sleeve up and slices into his upper arm enough to get some of the neon junk to bubble to the surface. If he smears a whole bunch of this against the door's cracks, stabs at it with all the force he's got, it might eventually blow up, no?

Admittedly, it's not his best idea, and it's going to take a lot of stabbing, but his foggy brain can't think up anything better right now.

He doesn't have to think up anything better, in the end.

Just as he's about to ram the knife in, the door clicks open. A trippy blueish aura begins to bleed into the room along with a few cracks of light. Katsuki's gut insists the blue stuff will burn like acid regardless of what he wills, so he finds himself allowing the door to open against him, effectively hiding him against the wall. He holds his breath as a

tall ass lanky dude with weird hair steps inside, alarmed, clearly baffled by the lack of Katsuki.

Before he can really turn around and figure out where Katsuki has fucked off to, Katsuki has beaten him to the punch and placed a firm hand onto his back, intent to shove him down and leg it up out of here.

His hand seems to get the wrong idea, because it latches onto the quirk factor instead, and if Katsuki thinks the way the goop melts against his skin as it tries to climb up him burns, his kidnapper must be feeling the equivalent of ten iron soled kicks to the balls — his breath stutters, he lets out this little choked off croak, and his entire body goes rigid before shaking like it's about to seize. Blinded by the pain, Katsuki roughly yanks his hand out of the aura, causing the man to fall forward onto his face like a rag doll.

Fuck.

What the fuck? What the fuck just happened?

Kidnapper asshole's quirk factor is absolutely losing it. The blue goop is turning in on itself, shifting from liquid to solid and back like some sort of oobleck from hell. As seconds bleed by, the man continues to lie there still and lifeless while his aura grows more and more corporeal, more and more solid. It wraps itself around him now, and not in the usual floaty way most auras do, but like it's trying to suffocate him.

Holy shit. Did Katsuki just kill this guy?

After taking a glance at the now open door in the empty hallway to freedom, Katsuki makes the stupid choice.

He crouches down and rolls kidnapper asshole around with his foot to figure out what's wrong with him.

His eyes widen. No wonder he's stiff as a board. The entire other half of his aura has solidified and damn near turned to stone, encasing him in a human-shaped blob of solid mass that's probably choking him out.

What in the ever-loving god is going on?

Katsuki grits his teeth, grabs the aura again around the upper neck area, and squeezes. Luckily, the mass is brittle and almost

immediately gives into his grip, cracking into webs of dust before stabilizing into a normal aura.

Kidnapper guy gasps a big, harsh breath before snapping his eyes open to drill them straight into Katsuki.

“There’s nothing,” he says. “There’s nothing. There’s nothing. There’s nothing,” he repeats, grabbing onto any part of Katsuki he can find. “Nothing, nothing, nothing,” he mutters like a deranged fucking lunatic staring at Katsuki and at the same time through him.

“Fucking freak,” Katsuki says, trying to brush the hands away as the crazy person refuses to budge, continues to chant, nothing like some kind of prayer.

It’s only now that Katsuki can really look at him that he gets a sense for who this is.

Deku’s not the only All Might fanboy around these parts anymore.

Sir Nighteye.

Looks like Katsuki’s hunch was dead on.

Has he mentioned he’s having a crazy swell time?

“Did that stupid Chicken put you up to this?” Katsuki asks, but Nighteye just continues to writhe like a worthless worm being zapped by light through a magnifying glass. It’s not pretty. Probably won’t be pretty until his aura stabilizes for good. Katsuki didn’t even mean to mess with it. His hand simply had an easier time latching onto it than onto Nighteye’s physical body, which is not a good thing, he thinks vaguely. Up until now, he’s had to make a conscious effort to touch quirks — if he now has to start making a conscious effort not to, what does that mean for his soul’s connection?

Fuck it.

“Where’s my shit, asshole?” he asks again, poking at Nighteye with his foot. The writhing has as good as disappeared now, but the hero still seems out of it, is still muttering under his breath. Honestly, all the shit Katsuki’s been through, and he still manages to find people more fucked up than him. If he has to play therapist for another kidnapper, he’s going to start charging hourly fees.

“Do you know where it is or nah?”

Nighteye legitimately gurgles as a response.

What a drama queen. Katsuki can see his aura is perfectly fine now.

He stares at the door, stares at Nighteye, then at the door again. Finally, he sighs.

They're not gonna leave him alone, so he might as well join their meeting and show them just how useless he is. If he leaves now, they'll kidnap him again the second he lets his guard down. Hell, Katsuki wouldn't be surprised if Hawks started claiming Katsuki tortured Nighteye to get the rest of the heroes on his side.

You did kind of fuck him up, to be fair.

Katsuki reassesses the hero and feels his skin break out into goosebumps. His eyes are blown so wide open they might pop out of his face and while he's no longer shuddering, the muttering doesn't sound like it's gonna stop any time soon.

It's not like he did it on purpose…

But he can't very well leave the bastard here.

Fuck his fucking life.

Kicking him all the way to the library is infeasible, unfortunately, so Katsuki is careful to grip only his blazer.

A grueling fifteen-minute walk across halls he swore to never step foot in again later, he unceremoniously dumps Nighteye onto the floor of the most annoying room in the whole complex.

It's so full of (pretty fucking powerful) people he can quite literally feel their auras radiate heat, and even if he weren't able to see those, it stinks of sweat and stale breath from a mile away.

"Try harder next time," he says with a bravado he doesn't quite feel, careful not to look too much upward too fast and overwhelm himself with all the quirks in the room. Everyone's looking at him, he can feel it — maybe three years ago this would've been nice, but now it's close to his worst nightmare. He sucks in a quiet breath.

"Listen, nerds," he says before any of the fifty people in this room he's sure want to talk right now starts yapping. "So we're clear, I didn't do shit to him, yeah? Just nudged him a little, and he went all hee-haw.

Not my guy not my problem, yeah?”

“What the fuck is going on?”

“Bakugou—”

“This is Bakugou?!”

“He killed Sir!”

“He’s not dead, idiot—!”

“I am so fucking confused right now—”

“Oh my god, Bakubro—”

Yeah, never mind. Katsuki really could kill someone right about now.

He breathes in again and chances a look up, keeping his gaze fuzzy till he can focus on just one familiar aura, looking worse for wear. No, it’s not Deku, or Icyhot.

“This is a new low even for you,” he says, walking up to the shitty round table where he’s guessing only the big boys get to sit and staring Chicken down with dead eyes. “A storage closet? Really?” The room is so charged a little shock could probably explode it. Hawks doesn’t look bothered by Nighteye’s state or Katsuki’s presence. If anything, he seems elated. “You didn’t even tie me up. These are noob mistakes, Birdbrain.”

“The purpose wasn’t to hurt you,” Hawks says.

“Oh, yeah, a bit of friendly coercion is all.”

“Exactly.”

“Your reputation couldn’t handle torture right after you murdered a guy on live TV I suppose.”

Hawks’ face dims a little, like Katsuki touched a sore spot, which good, hopefully, he can prod many more where that came from.

“Could we all get clued in here?” Endeavor regrettably makes his presence known, and oh, that’s where all the heat was coming from.

“No,” Katsuki says, barely glancing at him.

“Excuse me—?!”

“You’re like the third biggest reason for all my problems after Ballsack, so stuff it,” he doesn’t even allow Endeavor as much as a sputter before he’s latching back onto Hawks. He wants out of here, and he wants out of here now.

“What the fuck do you want?” Katsuki asks as if he doesn’t already know the answer.

“Your help—” Hawks’ says.

“Sure,” he says, leaning against the table. He internally prays nobody can see how he’s shaking. Just Izuku’s stupidly fucking massive aura beside him is giving him a headache, never mind every other stranger in this overcrowded hell hole. “The first thing you need to do is lock yourself up with no food or water for about three or four weeks, give or take, then you need to get All for One to try and take your quirk, but resist it really fucking hard, if you manage to he’ll get mad and just kill you right away, so for this step you don’t need to do much, then you—”

Hawks blinks at him, fed up. “What?” Katsuki says. “I’m giving you my information on how to deal with All for One—”

“This is unfeasible,” says Best Jeanist — whew, is this a blast from the past — “We don’t have three weeks, and resisting really fucking hard is not a metric—”

It takes him a second to get the point. Poor guy, blood takes ages to travel through that long ass neck to his jeans-on-the-wrong-load-sized brain.

“No shit sherlock,” he turns to all the heroes gathered now, careful to avoid his old classmates. Aizawa isn’t here, which is kind of odd. It makes Katsuki’s stomach twist in an unpleasant way. “As I’ve told your boss here—”

“He’s not our boss—!”

“—countless times before, I’m not All Might reincarnated nor do I have some kind of deal with All for One cheat sheet, I don’t know what I did, and the whole deal left me quirkless anyway, so if any of you are willing to risk it be my guests. That’s about all I can do for you.”

“Quirkless?” someone calls out. “But they said you got rid of Overhaul’s quirk?”

“I did,” Katsuki says. The memory is not a particularly fond one.

“Why can’t you do the same to All for One’s?”

“Because my shtick isn’t a quirk, idiots, it’s a weird middle state between dead and alive that lets me visualize and mess with quirk energy. In order to do that, I need to touch it. All of it.”

“Okay? So what?”

“So I had to literally yank every bit of Overhaul’s quirk away from his body, by hand, manually. I don’t know how much all of you know about Ballsack, but his quirk is an amalgamation of thousands of other quirks. That shit is massive. It would take me a month straight to dismantle all of it, and unless all of you want to be time-wasting canon fodder while I do that, I would never survive long enough to get the job done.”

“So he’s useless,” another voice he doesn’t recognize pipes up, and Katsuki hates himself for the way it makes him bristle.

“Yeah, what’s all the hype about anyway? Who cares if he can see quirks if he can’t do anything about it?”

“For all we know, the torture just made him schizophrenic.”

“Exactly,” Katsuki grits out, finally looking up at a dozen faces that seem to have trouble meeting his eyes. The room is thick with quirks, the sheer mass of them nearly suffocating. Katsuki can’t read the emotions on any of these people’s faces, and doesn’t want to read them either. He doesn’t want to be here. He doesn’t… “I’m useless,” he repeats, the word echoing in his head. “Stop fucking annoying me and let me do the shit I’m actually good at.”

“He’s lying to you,” Hawks says immediately.

Katsuki almost groans.

“He can do a lot more than he claims to. He just loves to run from his duties—”

“Oh fuck off, will you?! You already kicked me out once. This isn’t my duty.”

“—because he’s still bitter about getting expelled even after all this time.”

Katsuki flinches. He unironically flinches.

“Ain’t this that crazy kid they had to chain up at the sports festival?”

“He told a quirkless kid to kill himself, no?”

“Some gall. It’s not like the heroes wanted you to get kidnapped. Maybe you ought to have fought them off.”

“So he kills people willy nilly when it suits him, but when he actually has to help society, suddenly it’s too hard?”

“How do we know he’s not working for the villains? He seems to love claiming he’s not a hero.”

“I’m not fucking bitter,” Katsuki yells harshly. He can’t remember the last time he yelled this much. God, he wants out of this place.

“But you are spiteful—”

“No. I’m realistic. I know my limits.” It’s hard not to when you’ve had them pushed and tested in every which way. “And I know that if you put the fate of your shitty world on my shoulders, I’m gonna fail miserably and we’re all going to have a bad time.”

If anything, he’s doing them a favor, sparing them the false hope.

I always knew you were going to fuck it up.

It’s Round Cheeks who saves him the hassle of the dozen replies that the answer yields him. “Will all of you just stop it?” she demands. “We’re going in circles. We’ve been going in circles for days. Stop being stubborn and listen to what the guy keeps telling you.”

Katsuki could cry.

“He’s not going to solve our problems; we’re going to, and he can help just fine by being an informant. So either stop this nonsense bickering and start acting like adults or dissolve this meeting altogether so the rest of us can get some actually productive… shit done.”

He’s always respected her for a reason.

“I’m glad you’re okay, Bakugou-kun—” she says, ignoring him when

he mutters Katsuki under his breath. “—and I hope you’ll be willing to tell us a bit more. That sound alright to you?”

They’re all looking at him, the nerds. Deku, Icyhot, the teachers, and dumbasses he vaguely used to call friends.

It isn’t like Katsuki ever had a choice.

“Where’s my shit?” he asks Hawks later, when the shitty excuse for a séance has been adjourned for the day and the room has begun to empty. These idiots have kept him from Eri for hours more than his promised two. The kid already holds a grudge against him for keeping so much of his past a secret. He’s not sure how many more broken promises she can take.

“Was in the next room. Didn’t you take it?”

“Nah.”

“Well, before you pulled your little trick on him, Sir commed me to say he couldn’t find it, so I assumed—”

“How do you lose your own fucking loot—?!”

“I thought you had it,” Hawks continues, bored with him.

“No,” Katsuki grits out. “Where is it?”

Hawks shrugs. Katsuki swore off violence a while ago, yet he’s never wanted to strangle someone more.

“Don’t be petty.”

“I don’t know, I can’t help you,” Hawks says, his voice strangely pitched, like he’s trying to imitate Katsuki or something. “It’s not my responsibility.”

Except it fucking is, because he’s the one who fucking kidnapped Katsuki in the first place.

“What are you, five?”

“What are you, a pussy?”

Yeah, fuck this.

“I’m useless,” he says mockingly and hates the glint he sees in Hawks’ eyes immediately appear, like he’s found something he can use. “But you should talk to Toyota.”

“Huh?”

As much as he hates himself for it, Katsuki has been taking this discussion seriously. He has been seriously thinking about game plans, about strategies that could get them the win. As things stand now, the only thing that can get the heroes to leave him alone is an outcome where he’s no longer useful. So either they nuke the League or he offs himself for good.

“Fish the League’s location out of him. Use Endeavor as bait. You should be the ones taking them by surprise this time. Unless you’re the pussies.”

He doesn’t wait for Hawks’ response before making for the medical wing he’d failed to reach hours ago.

The couple of hours he was gone were all it took for the infirmary to completely go to shit. It seems all those at-risk patients Recovery Hag was worried about have worsened at once, and with the healing blood Katsuki promised nowhere to be seen, it’s going to be an upwards battle.

Katsuki is working on some poor sob with a massive gash in his stomach when one of the Medibots rolls a new bed in. He doesn’t have a healing quirk, and he didn’t magically become a high-grade surgeon in the span of a year either, so the hag has left him to deal with the people that only need stitches and wound care, two things you get really fucking good at when you have to fix yourself up every five business days. His mind has been wandering the whole time as he works mechanically, worries about Eri and home and how the fuck this situation is ever going to get better, worries that feel far too adult, buzzing around. Maybe that’s why it takes him a second to notice the mutilated man with only one eye, one leg, and bandages all over the place is Sensei.

He glances at the bed, continuing his work while the stupid bot explains that the patient Aizawa Shouta is stable and doesn’t need much other than monitoring until he wakes up. Katsuki’s head is hot. For the first time in god knows how long, he’s eerily aware of the way every ridge of his fingerprints touches the needle in his hand, of the tension he needs to pull with, of the sound the bit of metal makes as it

pierces through skin. Once Katsuki is done, he ties up the thread neatly, washes his hands before the wound dressing with more care than he's ever given himself, unable to resist the urge to take occasional glances at the idiotic hobo looking dumbass who used to be his teacher.

By occasional, he means every two seconds.

He doesn't know what to do with himself once he's done. Though Aizawa apparently "doesn't need much," the general check-up is Katsuki's job, and setting up all the monitoring stuff is Katsuki's job, so he pretends to rummage for the supplies in the corner of the room for a bit, moving instruments from shelf to shelf as though he hasn't already found them.

Chicken is right. He's the biggest pussy in the world.

The first thing you notice when you need to move someone without a leg is how light they are. Their weight, or rather lack of it, tricks your brain. Sensei is disheveled, but his face is calm, and he's breathing on his own. Katsuki truly doesn't need to do a lot other than pinch his finger with a heart rate and blood oxygen monitor and set up stickers all over his chest. He can't help but linger on the sheer mass of scars all over the parts of Sensei's body that aren't bandaged. Even during Katsuki's brief stint at UA, the guy had already had his entire body broken once. Katsuki doesn't want to know what kind of dangerous shit he got up to when he was Katsuki's age.

You think the rest of us are doing this because we want to? You think you 're the only one who's gotten hurt?

Katsuki despises this place.

His head hurts like it's being smashed with rocks, an odd and overwhelming sensation all at once. His eye hurts, his leg hurts, and he's not the one lying in bed without them. He's the one who's supposed to feel nothing at all.

"He'll wake up," Recovery Hag's voice snaps him out of his stupor a while later, and Katsuki realizes only then that he must've zoned out.

"I don't care," he says.

"That boy Todoroki cauterized his wounds in time so that there was no massive bleeding."

“Good for him,” Katsuki says, black eyes, two of them, flashing open in his vision.

Recovery Hag frowns in a way Katsuki doesn’t like.

“Find me those vials,” she says, prodding his foot with her cane the way Koharu used to do.

Katsuki is more than glad for an excuse to get out of there.

Whether he likes what he gets out to is a different story. The sky outside is dark, night has long fallen, but the air is hot and smoky, filled with something Katsuki senses and sees more than smells. It’s not difficult to spot a massive fire in the clearing of Ground Gamma, and after an initial shot of panic, Katsuki manages to quell. He remembers Izuku telling him there would need to be a funeral at some point.

Like a moth drawn to a flame, Katsuki’s feet move on their own, taking him closer to the bright lights one step at a time. The pyre is huge — they must’ve done away with everyone at once - the crowd gathered around the flames burning so hot their core is white even huger. He wonders who lit the fire. One of the Todorokis, surely. It can’t be natural, not with how much it rained earlier. Then he thinks about how fucking irrelevant it all is.

Still remote controlled by thoughts that can’t be his own, he locates familiar faces gathered one one of the grass patches already burnt to a crisp by Toyota days earlier. The ground is an odd mix of wet and dry and something in between. It hasn’t been very long since it stopped storming. He nudges himself a spot next to Shitty Hair, for some reason, and is surprised when a cigarette of all things is pushed into his hands.

“Need a light?” that one alien girl, raccoon eyes he used to call her, asks while offering a lighter too. Her face is puffy, her eyes tired and red.

Katsuki wrinkles his nose.

“Goody two-shoes never change, *Kacchan*,” the moronic excuse for a phone charger laughs, blowing smoke into Katsuki’s face, as though they’re not right next to a massive fire made of dead bodies and Katsuki has any semblance of a sense of smell left. As though Katsuki hadn’t, in their eyes, disappeared off the face of the Earth for the

previous two or some years. As though this is just a normal part of their daily lives. As though they're nothing more than teenage delinquents. "You were pretty cool in the meeting room earlier, you know."

Katsuki fans the smoke away with his hand, shaking his head to Raccoon Eyes again.

"You smoke?" he asks Shitty Hair quietly, slightly surprised although, when he thinks about it, he knows nothing about Kirishima beyond their strange four months of friendship when they were fifteen and stupid.

"I don't know," Kirishima says. The butt of his cigarette must be no more than a centimeter long as he puts it out against the ground.

They are meant to graduate and become full heroes in only a few months, Katsuki remembers then. They're all taller, buffer, stronger, older than the foggy versions of them in his memories.

Between that training camp fiasco years ago, the Hassaikai Raid, and Jakku, and now this, and who knows how many other things Katsuki has no knowledge of, they've been forced to grow up, too.

You think we're doing this because we want to?

Slowly, the group becomes bigger and bigger, more and more vaguely familiar nerds sitting down, some of them for a smoke, some of them for a talk, some of them to just sit there against each other in ways that feel too intimate for Katsuki to be privy to. He knows he should leave. Eri is waiting for him at home or god knows where. The longer he goes without finding his things, the more patients are at risk of dying in Recovery Hag's nuthouse. He has work to do. He barely knows these people.

But in this sea of strangers, *barely* seems to be good enough for him, and now that the novelty of his reappearance has worn off, now that there are far bigger things to worry about, nobody looks at Katsuki like he's a circus show. Nobody even looks at Katsuki twice.

For the first time in years, he's not the only one in his general vicinity whose world is falling apart. He stares at the pyre and thinks, thinks the same way everyone else does.

What kind of sick version of schadenfreude is this?

“Are— did anyone from our— your class get offed?” Katsuki asks he’s not sure how much later. Though the group’s numbers have swollen, those cliques he recalls from the first semester are still a vague thing, and not all of them are here sitting together.

“No,” Izuku tells him, looking to Round Cheeks for confirmation, though knowing him, that was probably the first thing he asked upon coming back.

“But Midnight-sensei…” earphone girl mumbles.

Katsuki isn’t sure how he feels about that, and no one is policing him on it either. Midnight had been far from his favorite teacher during his time at UA, hell, he’d go as far as to say he’d hated her — hating people had been the easiest thing in the world for him back then. But Katsuki had known her. Katsuki knew she’d probably died brutally. And now they’re using her as firewood.

“It’s cute that you still care about us, Kacchan,” Spark plugs can’t resist saying. He must be on his fifth cigarette by now, and he somehow sounds drunk and all dumbed out at the same time, which Katsuki is pretty sure tabacco isn’t capable of inducing. Katsuki stiffens a little.

He doesn’t even know them. He’s just… It’s normal human decency, right?

“Leave him be, Kami,” the one guy with the tape for arms prods, having noticed Katsuki’s discomfort, which makes Katsuki want to shrink away further.

“What, I’m just happy he’s alive bro. I don’t like dead people.”

Katsuki’s stayed here long enough. He stands up and drags Izuku with him with no explanation.

“Do you know where my shit is?” he asks once they’re out of earshot of anyone else.

“Why would I know that?” Izuku asks.

Katsuki has no answer. He stares at the fire. They’re so close to it now, the flames may as well be licking their faces.

“What’s really wrong?”

Katsuki sighs, hates the way Izuku has perfected getting the hint just enough to ask the right questions and still force Katsuki to spit out disgusting mushy things in the process.

“What are we going to do about this?” he asks lowly, not missing the way Izuku perks up a little at hearing “we” instead of the usual “you”.

“We need a plan,” Katsuki continues. “A real one. None of that bullshit Chicken and Endeavor come up with.”

“We’re working on the plan,” Izuku says.

“If you mean that stupid ass crappy meeting—“

“Our own plan,” Izuku says, shaking his head. “Me, Todoroki-kun, Ochako, a few others.”

“Yeah?” Katsuki might be sweating; he’s not sure. His shirt is clinging to his back.

“All Might and the vestiges warned me from the start it would come to a head at some point. Todoroki knew too, probably thanks to you, and I think Ochako’s just realized.” Izuku looks at the fire , as though searching for the same spot Katsuki’s eyes have landed on. “We need to get rid of All for One once and for all,” Izuku breathes, “and save everyone else in the process.”

“Save who?” Katsuki asks, knowing already he won’t like the answer.

“Tenko, Todoroki-kun’s brother, Toga, you…”

“What the fuck are you talking about, Deku?” Katsuki’s not sure he can breathe either. “Who the fuck is Tenko?”

“Shigaraki,” Izuku says easily, like he’s not talking about “saving” the ones responsible for this whole shitshow in the first place. Like he wouldn’t get straight up lynched if the people here who’ve lost family, friends, loved ones to Shigaraki’s decay heart that absurd notion.

“Why don’t you save All for One too, while you’re at it?”

“I’m not sure we can,” Izuku doesn’t miss a beat. This— this maniac has actually considered the notion. “He’s— First says he was evil from the start.”

“You’re crazy.” And here Katsuki thought he was going to someone more sane than Chicken.

“We know more about Shigaraki now. He’s Shimura Nana’s nephew. We’re pretty sure he wasn’t born with decay. All for One stole it from someone years earlier, gave it to Tenko when he was a child, and he killed his own family because he had no idea how to control it. He — he’s been manipulated his whole life. All for One’s set this all up. Killing his pawns won’t get us anywhere. They’re the way they are because heroes failed to save them before. If we save them now, they could— they could still have a second chance—“

Katsuki stops listening, his head firing a mile a minute. He feels slightly sick, from fatigue, from the thickness of the air, from all the auras everywhere. Maybe Deku has a point. Katsuki hurt people, and he didn’t even have a tragic backstory to excuse it. Like All for One, he was evil from the start. He was power hungry, cruel, and mean for the sake of it. He got a second chance, and a third, and a fourth, and a… Who is he to decide who gets to live or die? Who is he to decide anything?

“Izuku, listen,” Katsuki says, flinching when Deku flinches at being touched because Katsuki has again touched One for All instead of him. He stops doing that quickly, squeezing Deku’s shoulder. “I don’t care. We just need to deal with it—“ However that ends up happening.

“We will deal with it,” Izuku says firmly.

“Good,” Katsuki says, only feeling more ill by the second.

“Good,” Izuku repeats.

They stare at each other for a beat before Katsuki runs off, shooting off some very real excuse about Recovery Hag and demanding (begging) Deku not to follow.

He walks a bit blindly, at a pace that’s not particularly comfortable, in a direction he’s not sure of. The longer he stays here, the clearer it becomes to him he won’t be able to leave again, not without putting his ass in the line of fire. He wants to leave. He wants nothing to do with this.

He can’t leave.

Katsuki collides with a telephone pole. A very human-shaped blonde blue-eyed telephone pole that looks an awful lot like the skeletal All Might he constantly sees on TV.

“Young Bakugou?” the unfortunately sentient telephone pole says.

That fortune teller dude wasn't kidding when he said Katsuki has the worst luck in the world. Who will this shitty campus throw at him next? His fucking mother?

Toshinori is not the only one who's grown taller and lankier in the two years that have passed since he and Young Bakugou last saw each. The boy has lost a few of his boyish features, and, though Toshinori had been told about the changes in his coloring several times before from people who'd seen him since his disappearance, the first-hand view of it is a little jarring.

If Toshinori blinks, Young Bakugou may very well melt away into the air.

"All Might," he says, wobbly as he stands up, having refused Toshinori's outstretched hand. "You're still up and kicking, huh?"

Toshinori grins a little, in the way he knows is reminiscent of his hero form. Young Bakugou's strange translucent eyes follow the motion.

"You weren't at their stupid scheming party earlier," Young Bakugou points out.

Toshinori had been out in the city, seeing the destruction for himself, chancing upon old enemies turned friends, old friends turned enemies. He may be a powerless old man with only embers of life left, but that doesn't mean he won't take advantage of them until the very end.

"Or this fuckass excuse for a funeral now," Young Bakugou continues, almost manic. He seems as though he's torn between asking Toshinori a million questions and running as far away from him as possible.

"I was looking for you," Toshinori says. It's a bit of a white lie. Speaking to Young Bakugou had been one of his intentions since he had found out the boy was here, but the current encounter was one entirely of chance. "I wanted to apologise, first for the way you were expelled, and second for never rescuing you after the raid at Kamino."

Young Bakugou stares at him like a fish out of water. His mouth opens and closes as he struggles to get words out. Toshinori is a bit taken aback. He had always read the boy as someone who had difficulty with vulnerability, with apologies, with both providing and accepting them, but the degree of his confusion is palpable.

"What the fuck has gotten into all of you?!" he finally manages, like,

despite all of the things Toshinori knows he has been through, *this* is somehow the worst day of his life.

“I’m glad,” Toshinori continues, choosing not to prod at Bakugou’s discomfort. “That you’ve chosen to join forces with us despite all that happened to you. Part of being a hero is breaking these sorts of barriers—“

“I’m not—“ Young Bakugou says. “I’m not a hero.”

Toshinori feels the smile slide off his face. Has he been too quick to assume? The boy he’d first met some three years ago would rather have died than have those words come out of his mouth.

“I can’t help you — not like that. I’m quirkless. I’m— I can’t fight.”

Toshinori isn’t sure he is speaking to Bakugou anymore.

“Why?” he asks simply, and Bakugou only stares back at him stiffly.

As the awkward silence stretches on, Toshinori isn’t sure what he can do to break it. He can’t fathom why somebody who’d fought tooth and nail to be a hero and had tricked All for One in a way no one had managed before for centuries would ever start behaving like this.

“Weren’t you ever—“ Young Bakugou suddenly starts, shaking his head to interrupt his own thought, as though embarrassed by it. “Why *should* I?” he asks instead.

The answer is, to Toshinori at least, very simple. “Because you’re a hero.”

“I’m not,” Bakugou insists. “Never was.”

“You can be,” Toshinori fights back, just as stubborn. “Anyone can be. Someone *has* to be.”

Toshinori gets it. He’d asked himself this question a lot, especially after Shimura-sensei had died. The weight of the world was now on his shoulders, solely on his. He had to be the beacon of light. But what guarantee did he have that he, once a quirkless wimp of a child, would ever be special in a way his predecessors hadn’t been? If his masters had all died, what could Toshinori possibly have that they didn’t?

Nothing but a will forged of steel and everything they’d passed onto

him. Nothing but millions of people to protect. Nothing but a world to save and a smile to hide behind.

“Times have changed,” Toshinori says. It’s no longer about a singular, lone beacon of hope shouldering all the pain and suffering. “It took my own successor for me to understand that power can’t be built alone. Safety can’t be built alone.” Not even evil can be built alone. Without quirks to steal, All for One would be nothing. “We must all work towards it.”

Bakugou’s strange eyes stare into Toshinori’s. Though the circumstances are entirely different, the hero is reminded of the feeling he had watching the boy after his first loss against Izuku, all those years ago. Silently, without words or tears or anger this time, the gears in Bakugou’s head are turning.

And then, without saying anything at all, Bakugou simply walks away.

Toshinori hopes that it helped.

UA is kind of huge.

Eri collapses against a tree that’s both wet and crispy at the same time. She can’t find this fucking infirmary, it smells like funky pork barbecue everywhere, and the massive fire she saw spreading from ground Gamma on her way to the gym there put her off massively. She’s had to change course, and she has no idea where this new one leads her anymore. She's been walking in circles for *hours*.

The cat curls up next to her, starting to clean himself from all the mud he’s tracked everywhere. Eri’s a bit muddy herself, her shoes are wet from soggy dirt and tar. She’s hungry, she’s thirsty, and she’s very close to giving up and going home, waiting for Kacchan there. Except she’s got all of Kacchan’s belongings, including his portal, the same one Deku and Shouto had used to find their house, so if she leaves now, how would he ever come back?

She’s starting to think she’s in over her head.

“It’s not my fault,” she tells Satsu. “I don’t know any of these fuckers here.”

Her network of connections — Chisaki loved talking about connections — it’s not very wide, admittedly. Outside of Kacchan and Satsu, she only has the weird older ladies who hang around Kacchan

sometimes, one of whom tried to kill them a few months ago, and her friends at school, who are all useless seven-year-olds, and Fuyumi-sensei—

“Fuyumi-sensei,” she says, gasping as she digs in her bag for her phone.

In her anger and stubbornness, and betrayal, she’s forgotten she has an insider on campus.

“But I hung up on her earlier, and she was shitting on me for being too much of a kid like Kacchan and—“

Eri isn’t sure how a cat could possibly watch you this judgmentally, but that’s exactly what Satsu is doing.

“Okay, I get it, she says. I need to get my head out of my ass.”

Sensei answers on the second ring.

Fuyumi has just finished explaining the location of their campout to Eri before their call is interrupted by another incoming one. Shouto’s phone, which must finally be charged again. She tells Eri she’ll be waiting for them in the tent before ending that call to accept Shouto’s. It takes every bone of restraint in her body not to yell out Katsuki when she hears his voice instead of her brother’s.

“Have you talked to the brat?” he immediately demands. He’s as gruff as always, but the undertones of what she’s hearing are kind of defeated.

“Where have you been?” Fuyumi shoots back, glancing around the room to check that Katsuki’s parents are gone, that they can’t magically hear them. They’re at the other side of the room, still filling their time anxiously, in any way they can.

“Have you talked to her or not?”

“She called me,” Fuyumi cuts it short. “Why is she at UA?”

“Right. Okay. What did you tell her?” Katsuki interrupts, having seemingly heard enough.

“To come to me,” Fuyumi says, glancing at the Bakugous again. It is the truth, in her defense.

“Okay. Where are you?”

She rattles off the name of their campout without thinking much of it.

“Okay,” Katsuki says, unusually curt.

“But, Ka—“ he hangs up on her. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, she supposes.

Fuyumi sinks into one of the flimsy chairs and puts her head in her hands, sighing.

“What’s wrong?” mom asks, her hand cool on Fuyumi’s knee. Through her bangs and glasses, Fuyumi peers at the Bakugous again. “Is Shouto alright?”

“Shouto’s fine,” she says. How fine this tent is going to be in approximately ten minutes is what she’s more worried about.

“Fuck.”

Chapter End Notes

> take my word slop. i will try to finally finish this fic within this month, so you can expect semi regular updates starting from now
> im a bit sorry for how disjointed everything has become, i suppose this is what happens when you take a 3+ year hiatus haha
> if i manage to finally finish this behemoth, im thinking of writing a post canon story featuring bakugou again. i have mixed feelings about mha's final arc and ending as a bakugou fan, so i would love to dive into that. my time is far more limited now than it was when i began writing slope, however, so im not sure if it would pan out, but let me know if you guys would be interested.
>
> i'd like to thank everyone for their thoughts and time once again.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!